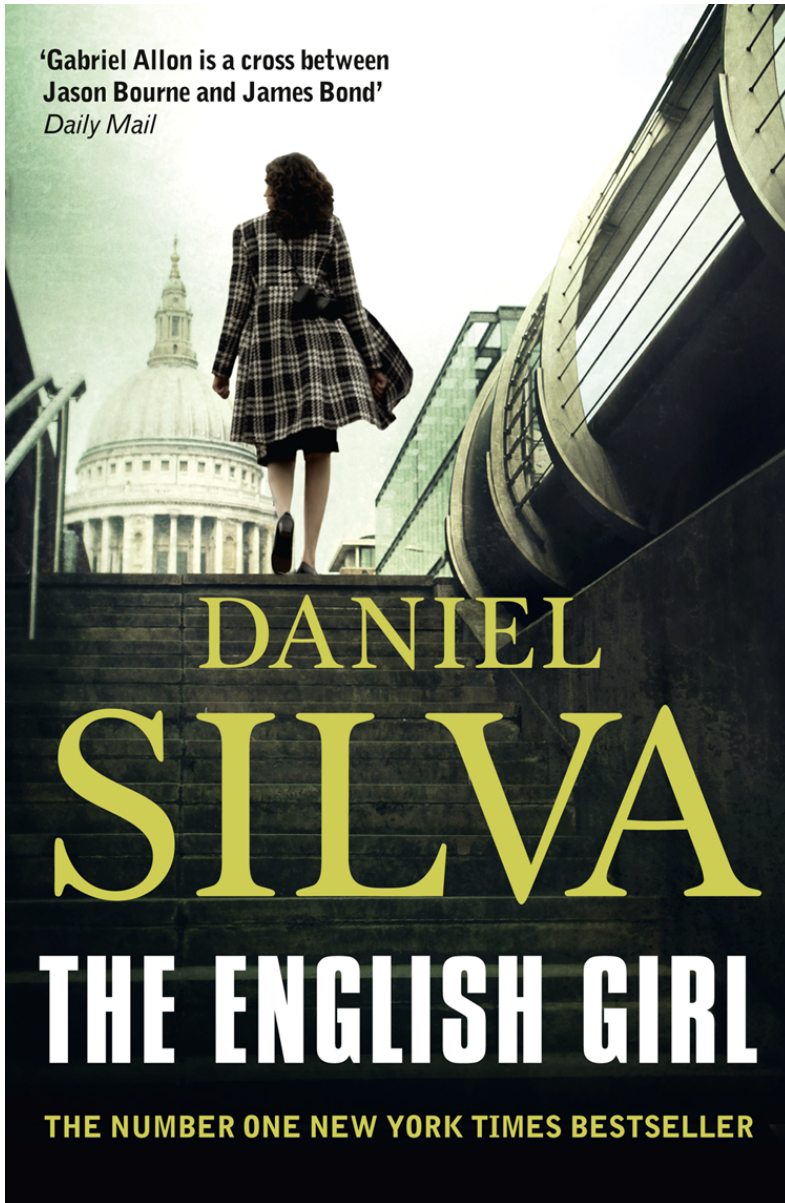


**'Gabriel Allon is a cross between
Jason Bourne and James Bond'**
Daily Mail



DANIEL
SILVA

THE ENGLISH GIRL

THE NUMBER ONE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Daniel Silva
The English Girl

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Gabriel Allon, master art restorer and assassin, returns in a spellbinding new thriller from No.1 bestselling author Daniel Silva. For all fans of Robert Ludlum. When a beautiful young British woman vanishes on the island of Corsica, a prime minister's career is threatened with destruction. And Gabriel Allon, master art restorer, spy, and assassin, is thrust into a game of shadows where nothing is what it seems and where the only thing more dangerous than his enemies might be the truth...

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The English Girl
Daniel Silva

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Dedication

*Once again, for my wife, Jamie, and my children, Lily and Nicholas
He who lives an immoral life dies an immoral death.*

CORSICAN PROVERB

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PART ONE

1

PIANA, CORSICA

THEY CAME FOR her in late August, on the island of Corsica. The precise time would never be determined—some point between sunset and noon the following day was the best any of her housemates could do. Sunset was when they saw her for the last time, streaking down the drive of the villa on a red motor scooter, a gauzy cotton skirt fluttering about her suntanned thighs. Noon was when they realized her bed was empty except for a trashy half-read paperback novel that smelled of coconut oil and faintly of rum. Another twenty-four hours would elapse before they got around to calling the gendarmes. It had been that kind of summer, and Madeline was that kind of girl.

They had arrived on Corsica a fortnight earlier, four pretty girls and two earnest boys, all faithful servants of the British government or the political party that was running it these days. They had a single car, a communal Renault hatchback large enough to accommodate five uncomfortably, and the red motor scooter which was exclusively Madeline's and which she rode with a recklessness bordering on suicidal. Their ocher-colored villa stood at the western fringe of the village on a cliff overlooking the sea. It was tidy and compact, the sort of place estate agents always described as "charming." But it had a swimming pool and a walled garden filled with rosemary bushes and pepper trees; and within hours of alighting there they had settled into the blissful state of sunburned semi-nudity to which British tourists aspire, no matter where their travels take them.

Though Madeline was the youngest of the group, she was their unofficial leader, a burden she accepted without protest. It was Madeline who had managed the rental of the villa, and Madeline who arranged the long lunches, the late dinners, and the day trips into the wild Corsican interior, always leading the way along the treacherous roads on her motor scooter. Not once did she bother to consult a map. Her encyclopedic knowledge of the island's geography, history, culture, and cuisine had been acquired during a period of intense study and preparation conducted in the weeks leading up to the journey. Madeline, it seemed, had left nothing to chance. But then she rarely did.

She had come to the Party's Millbank headquarters two years earlier, after graduating from the University of Edinburgh with degrees in economics and social policy. Despite her second-tier education—most of her colleagues were products of elite public schools and Oxbridge—she rose quickly through a series of clerical posts before being promoted to director of community outreach. Her job, as she often described it, was to forage for votes among classes of Britons who had no business supporting the Party, its platform, or its candidates. The post, all agreed, was but a way station along a journey to better things. Madeline's future was bright—"solar flare bright," in the words of Pauline, who had watched her younger colleague's ascent with no small amount of envy. According to the rumor mill, Madeline had been taken under the wing of someone high in the Party. Someone close to the prime minister. Perhaps even the prime minister himself. With her television good looks, keen intellect, and boundless energy, Madeline was being groomed for a safe seat in Parliament and a ministry of her own. It was only a matter of time. Or so they said.

Which made it all the more odd that, at twenty-seven years of age, Madeline Hart remained romantically unattached. When asked to explain the barren state of her love life, she would declare she was too busy for a man. Fiona, a slightly wicked dark-haired beauty from the Cabinet Office, found the explanation dubious. More to the point, she believed Madeline was being deceitful—deceitfulness being one of Fiona's most redeeming qualities, thus her interest in Party politics. To support her theory, she would point out that Madeline, while loquacious on almost every subject imaginable, was unusually guarded when it came to her personal life. Yes, said Fiona, she was willing to toss out the occasional harmless tidbit about her troubled childhood—the dreary council house in Essex, the father whose face she could scarcely recall, the alcoholic brother who'd never worked a day in his

life—but everything else she kept hidden behind a moat and walls of stone. “Our Madeline could be an ax murderer or a high-priced tart,” said Fiona, “and none of us would be the wiser.” But Alison, a Home Office underling with a much-broken heart, had another theory. “The poor lamb’s in love,” she declared one afternoon as she watched Madeline rising goddess-like from the sea in the tiny cove beneath the villa. “The trouble is, the man in question isn’t returning the favor.”

“Why ever not?” asked Fiona drowsily from beneath the brim of an enormous sun visor.

“Maybe he’s in no position to.”

“Married?”

“But of course.”

“Bastard.”

“You’ve never?”

“Had an affair with a married man?”

“Yes.”

“Just twice, but I’m considering a third.”

“You’re going to burn in hell, Fi.”

“I certainly hope so.”

It was then, on the afternoon of the seventh day, and upon the thinnest of evidence, that the three girls and two boys staying with Madeline Hart in the rented villa at the edge of Piana took it upon themselves to find her a lover. And not just any lover, said Pauline. He had to be appropriate in age, fine in appearance and breeding, and stable in his finances and mental health, with no skeletons in his closet and no other women in his bed. Fiona, the most experienced when it came to matters of the heart, declared it a mission impossible. “He doesn’t exist,” she explained with the weariness of a woman who had spent much time looking for him. “And if he does, he’s either married or so infatuated with himself he won’t have the time of day for poor Madeline.”

Despite her misgivings, Fiona threw herself headlong into the challenge, if for no other reason than it would add a hint of intrigue to the holiday. Fortunately, she had no shortage of potential targets, for it seemed half the population of southeast England had abandoned their sodden isle for the sun of Corsica. There was the colony of City financiers who had rented grandly at the northern end of the Golfe de Porto. And the band of artists who were living like Gypsies in a hill town in the Castagniccia. And the troupe of actors who had taken up residence on the beach at Campomoro. And the delegation of opposition politicians who were plotting a return to power from a villa atop the cliffs of Bonifacio. Using the Cabinet Office as her calling card, Fiona quickly arranged a series of impromptu social encounters. And on each occasion—be it a dinner party, a hike into the mountains, or a boozy afternoon on the beach—she snared the most eligible male present and deposited him at Madeline’s side. None, however, managed to scale her walls, not even the young actor who had just completed a successful run as the lead in the West End’s most popular musical of the season.

“She’s obviously got it bad,” Fiona conceded as they headed back to the villa late one evening, with Madeline leading the way through the darkness on her red motor scooter.

“Who do you reckon he is?” asked Alison.

“Dunno,” Fiona drawled enviously. “But he must be someone quite special.”

It was at this point, with slightly more than a week remaining until their planned return to London, that Madeline began spending significant amounts of time alone. She would leave the villa early each morning, usually before the others had risen, and return in late afternoon. When asked about her whereabouts, she was transparently vague, and at dinner she was often sullen or preoccupied. Alison naturally feared the worst, that Madeline’s lover, whoever he was, had sent notice that her services were no longer required. But the following day, upon returning to the villa from a shopping excursion, Fiona and Pauline happily declared that Alison was mistaken. It seemed that Madeline’s lover had come to Corsica. And Fiona had the pictures to prove it.

The sighting had occurred at ten minutes past two, at Les Palmiers, on the Quai Adolphe Landry in Calvi. Madeline had been seated at a table along the edge of the harbor, her head turned slightly toward the sea, as though unaware of the man in the chair opposite. Large dark glasses concealed her eyes. A straw sun hat with an elaborate black bow shadowed her flawless face. Pauline had tried to approach the table, but Fiona, sensing the strained intimacy of the scene, had suggested a hasty retreat instead. She had paused long enough to surreptitiously snap the first incriminating photograph on her mobile phone. Madeline had appeared unaware of the intrusion, but not the man. At the instant Fiona pressed the camera button, his head had turned sharply, as if alerted by some animal instinct that his image was being electronically captured.

After fleeing to a nearby brasserie, Fiona and Pauline carefully examined the man in the photograph. His hair was gray-blond, windblown, and boyishly full. It fell onto his forehead and framed an angular face dominated by a small, rather cruel-looking mouth. The clothing was vaguely maritime: white trousers, a blue-striped oxford cloth shirt, a large diver's wristwatch, canvas loafers with soles that would leave no marks on the deck of a ship. That was the kind of man he was, they decided. A man who never left marks.

They assumed he was British, though he could have been German or Scandinavian or perhaps, thought Pauline, a descendant of Polish nobility. Money was clearly not an issue, as evidenced by the pricey bottle of champagne sweating in the silver ice bucket anchored to the side of the table. His fortune was earned rather than inherited, they decided, and not altogether clean. He was a gambler. He had Swiss bank accounts. He traveled to dangerous places. Mainly, he was discreet. His affairs, like his canvas boat shoes, left no marks.

But it was the image of Madeline that intrigued them most. She was no longer the girl they knew from London, or even the girl with whom they had been sharing a villa for the past two weeks. It seemed she had adopted an entirely different demeanor. She was an actress in another movie. The other woman. Now, hunched over the mobile phone like a pair of schoolgirls, Fiona and Pauline wrote the dialogue and added flesh and bones to the characters. In their version of the story, the affair had begun innocently enough with a chance encounter in an exclusive New Bond Street shop. The flirtation had been long, the consummation meticulously planned. But the ending of the story temporarily eluded them, for in real life it had yet to be written. Both agreed it would be tragic. "That's the way stories like this *always* end," Fiona said from experience. "Girl meets boy. Girl falls in love with boy. Girl gets hurt and does her very best to destroy boy."

Fiona would snap two more photographs of Madeline and her lover that afternoon. One showed them walking along the quay through brilliant sunlight, their knuckles furtively touching. The second showed them parting without so much as a kiss. The man then climbed into a Zodiac dinghy and headed out into the harbor. Madeline mounted her red motor scooter and started back toward the villa. By the time she arrived, she was no longer in possession of the sun hat with the elaborate black bow. That night, while recounting the events of her afternoon, she made no mention of a visit to Calvi, or of a luncheon with a prosperous-looking man at Les Palmiers. Fiona thought it a rather impressive performance. "Our Madeline is an extraordinarily good liar," she told Pauline. "Perhaps her future is as bright as they say. Who knows? She might even be prime minister someday."

That night, the four pretty girls and two earnest boys staying in the rented villa planned to dine in the nearby town of Porto. Madeline made the reservation in her schoolgirl French and even imposed on the proprietor to set aside his finest table, the one on the terrace overlooking the rocky sweep of the bay. It was assumed they would travel to the restaurant in their usual caravan, but shortly before seven Madeline announced she was going to Calvi to have a drink with an old friend from Edinburgh. "I'll meet you at the restaurant," she shouted over her shoulder as she sped down the drive.

“And for heaven’s sake, try to be on time for a change.” And then she was gone. No one thought it odd when she failed to appear for dinner that night. Nor were they alarmed when they woke to find her bed unoccupied. It had been that kind of summer, and Madeline was that kind of girl.

2 CORSICA-LONDON

THE FRENCH NATIONAL Police officially declared Madeline Hart missing at 2:00 p.m. on the final Friday of August. After three days of searching, they had found no trace of her except for the red motor scooter, which was discovered, headlamp smashed, in an isolated ravine near Monte Cinto. By week's end, the police had all but given up hope of finding her alive. In public they insisted the case remained first and foremost a search for a missing British tourist. Privately, however, they were already looking for her killer.

There were no potential suspects or persons of interest other than the man with whom she had lunched at Les Palmiers on the afternoon before her disappearance. But, like Madeline, it seemed he had vanished from the face of the earth. Was he a secret lover, as Fiona and the others suspected, or had their acquaintance been recently made on Corsica? Was he British? Was he French? Or, as one frustrated detective put it, was he a space alien from another galaxy who had been turned into particles and beamed back to the mother ship? The waitress at Les Palmiers was of little help. She recalled that he spoke English to the girl in the sun hat but had ordered in perfect French. The bill he had paid in cash—crisp, clean notes that he dealt onto the table like a high-stakes gambler—and he had tipped well, which was rare these days in Europe, what with the economic crisis and all. What she remembered most about him were his hands. Very little hair, no sunspots or scars, clean nails. He obviously took good care of his nails. She liked that in a man.

His photograph, which was shown discreetly around the island's better watering holes and eating establishments, elicited little more than an apathetic shrug. It seemed no one had laid eyes on him. And if they had, they couldn't recall his face. He was like every other poseur who washed ashore in Corsica each summer: a good tan, expensive sunglasses, a golden hunk of Swiss-made ego on his wrist. He was a nothing with a credit card and a pretty girl on the other side of the table. He was the forgotten man.

To the shopkeepers and restaurateurs of Corsica, perhaps, but not to the French police. They ran his image through every criminal database they had in their arsenal, and then they ran it through a few more. And when each search produced nothing so much as a glimmer of a match, they debated whether to release a photo to the press. There were some, especially in the higher ranks, who argued against such a move. After all, they said, it was possible the poor fellow was guilty of nothing more than marital infidelity, hardly a crime in France. But when another seventy-two hours passed with no progress to speak of, they came to the conclusion they had no choice but to ask the public for help. Two carefully cropped photographs were released to the press—one of the man seated at Les Palmiers, the other of him walking along the quay—and by nightfall, investigators were inundated with hundreds of tips. They quickly weeded out the quacks and cranks and focused their resources on only those leads that were remotely plausible. But not one bore fruit. One week after the disappearance of Madeline Hart, their only suspect was still a man without a name or even a country.

Though the police had no promising leads, they had no shortage of theories. One group of detectives thought the man from Les Palmiers was a psychotic predator who had lured Madeline into a trap. Another group wrote him off as someone who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was married, according to this theory, and thus in no position to step forward to cooperate with police. As for Madeline's fate, they argued, it was probably a robbery gone wrong—a young woman riding a motorbike alone, she would have been a tempting target. Eventually, the body would turn up. The sea would spit it out, a hiker would stumble across it in the hills, a farmer would unearth it while plowing his field. That was the way it was on the island. Corsica always gave up its dead.

In Britain, the failures of the police were an occasion to bash the French. But for the most part, even the newspapers sympathetic to the opposition treated Madeline's disappearance as though it were a national tragedy. Her remarkable rise from a council house in Essex was chronicled in detail, and numerous Party luminaries issued statements about a promising career cut short. Her tearful mother and shiftless brother gave a single television interview and then disappeared from public view. The same was true of her holiday mates from Corsica. Upon their return to Britain, they appeared jointly at a news conference at Heathrow Airport, watched over by a team of Party press aides. Afterward, they refused all other interview requests, including those that came with lucrative payments. Absent from the coverage was any trace of scandal. There were no stories about heavy holiday drinking, sexual antics, or public disturbances, only the usual drivel about the dangers faced by young women traveling in foreign countries. At Party headquarters, the press team quietly congratulated themselves on their skillful handling of the affair, while the political staff noticed a marked spike in the prime minister's approval numbers. Behind closed doors, they called it "the Madeline effect."

Gradually, the stories about her fate moved from the front pages to the interior sections, and by the end of September she was gone from the papers entirely. It was autumn and therefore time to return to the business of government. The challenges facing Britain were enormous: an economy in recession, a euro zone on life support, a laundry list of unaddressed social ills that were tearing at the fabric of life in the United Kingdom. Hanging over it all was the prospect of an election. The prime minister had dropped numerous hints he intended to call one before the end of the year. He was well aware of the political perils of turning back now; Jonathan Lancaster was Britain's current head of government because his predecessor had failed to call an election after months of public flirtation. Lancaster, then leader of the opposition, had called him "the Hamlet from Number Ten," and the mortal wound was struck.

Which explained why Simon Hewitt, the prime minister's director of communications, had not been sleeping well of late. The pattern of his insomnia never varied. Exhausted by the crushing daily grind of his job, he would fall asleep quickly, usually with a file propped on his chest, only to awaken after two or three hours. Once conscious, his mind would begin to race. After four years in government, he seemed incapable of focusing on anything but the negative. Such was the lot of a Downing Street press aide. In Simon Hewitt's world, there were no triumphs, only disasters and near disasters. Like earthquakes, they ranged in severity from tiny tremors that were scarcely felt to seismic upheavals capable of toppling buildings and upending lives. Hewitt was expected to predict the coming calamity and, if possible, contain the damage. Lately, he had come to realize his job was impossible. In his darkest moments, this gave him a small measure of comfort.

He had once been a man to be reckoned with in his own right. As chief political columnist for the *Times*, Hewitt had been one of the most influential people in Whitehall. With but a few words of his trademark razor-edged prose, he could doom a government policy, along with the political career of the minister who had crafted it. Hewitt's power had been so immense that no government would ever introduce an important initiative without first running it by him. And no politician dreaming of a brighter future would ever think about standing for a party leadership post without first securing Hewitt's backing. One such politician had been Jonathan Lancaster, a former City lawyer from a safe seat in the London suburbs. At first, Hewitt didn't think much of Lancaster; he was too polished, too good-looking, and too privileged to take seriously. But with time, Hewitt had come to regard Lancaster as a gifted man of ideas who wanted to remake his moribund political party and then remake his country. Even more surprising, Hewitt discovered he actually *liked* Lancaster, never a good sign. And as their relationship progressed, they spent less time gossiping about Whitehall political machinations and more time discussing how to repair Britain's broken society. On election night, when Lancaster was swept to victory with the largest parliamentary majority in a generation, Hewitt was one of the first people he telephoned. "Simon," he had said in that seductive voice of his. "I need

you, Simon. I can't do this alone." Hewitt had then written glowingly of Lancaster's prospects for success, knowing full well that in a few days' time he would be working for him at Downing Street.

Now Hewitt opened his eyes slowly and stared contemptuously at the clock on his bedside table. It glowed 3:42, as if mocking him. Next to it were his three mobile devices, all fully charged for the media onslaught of the coming day. He wished he could so easily recharge his own batteries, but at this point no amount of sleep or tropical sunlight could repair the damage he had inflicted on his middle-aged body. He looked at Emma. As usual, she was sleeping soundly. Once, he might have pondered some lecherous way of waking her, but not now; their marital bed had become a frozen hearth. For a brief time, Emma had been seduced by the glamour of Hewitt's job at Downing Street, but she had come to resent his slavish devotion to Lancaster. She saw the prime minister almost as a sexual rival and her hatred of him had reached an irrational fervor. "You're twice the man he is, Simon," she'd informed him last night before bestowing a loveless kiss on his sagging cheek. "And yet, for some reason, you feel the need to play the role of his handmaiden. Perhaps someday you'll tell me why."

Hewitt knew that sleep wouldn't come again, not now, so he lay awake in bed and listened to the sequence of sounds that signaled the commencement of his day. The thud of the morning newspapers on his doorstep. The gurgle of the automatic coffeemaker. The purr of a government sedan in the street beneath his window. Rising carefully so as not to wake Emma, he pulled on his dressing gown and padded downstairs to the kitchen. The coffeemaker was hissing angrily. Hewitt prepared a cup, black for the sake of his expanding waistline, and carried it into the entrance hall. A blast of wet wind greeted him as he opened the door. The pile of newspapers was covered in plastic and lying on the welcome mat, next to a clay pot of dead geraniums. Stooping, he saw something else: a manila envelope, eight by ten, no markings, tightly sealed. Hewitt knew instantly it had not come from Downing Street; no one on his staff would dare to leave even the most trivial document outside his door. Therefore, it had to be something unsolicited. It was not unusual; his old colleagues in the press knew his Hampstead address and were forever leaving parcels for him. Small gifts for a well-timed leak. Angry rants over a perceived slight. A naughty rumor that was too sensitive to transmit via e-mail. Hewitt made a point of keeping up with the latest Whitehall gossip. As a former reporter, he knew that what was said behind a man's back was oftentimes much more important than what was written about him on the front pages.

He prodded the envelope with his toe to make certain it contained no wiring or batteries, then placed it atop the newspapers and returned to the kitchen. After switching on the television and lowering the volume to a whisper, he removed the papers from the plastic wrapper and quickly scanned the front pages. They were dominated by Lancaster's proposal to make British industry more competitive by lowering tax rates. The *Guardian* and the *Independent* were predictably appalled, but thanks to Hewitt's efforts most of the coverage was positive. The other news from Whitehall was mercifully benign. No earthquakes. Not even a tremor.

After working his way through the so-called quality broadsheets, Hewitt quickly read the tabloids, which he regarded as a better barometer of British public opinion than any poll. Then, after refilling his coffee cup, he opened the anonymous envelope. Inside were three items: a DVD, a single sheet of A4 paper, and a photograph.

"Shit," said Hewitt softly. "Shit, shit, shit."

What transpired next would later be the source of much speculation and, for Simon Hewitt, a former political journalist who surely should have known better, no small amount of recrimination. Because instead of contacting London's Metropolitan Police, as required by British law, Hewitt carried the envelope and its contents to his office at 12 Downing Street, located just two doors down from the prime minister's official residence at Number Ten. After conducting his usual eight o'clock staff meeting, during which no mention was made of the items, he showed them to Jeremy Fallon,

Lancaster's chief of staff and political consigliere. Fallon was the most powerful chief of staff in British history. His official responsibilities included strategic planning and policy coordination across the various departments of government, which empowered him to poke his nose into any matter he pleased. In the press, he was often referred to as "Lancaster's brain," which Fallon rather liked and Lancaster privately resented.

Fallon's reaction differed only in his choice of an expletive. His first instinct was to bring the material to Lancaster at once, but because it was a Wednesday he waited until Lancaster had survived the weekly gladiatorial death match known as Prime Minister's Questions. At no point during the meeting did Lancaster, Hewitt, or Jeremy Fallon suggest handing the material over to the proper authorities. What was required, they agreed, was a person of discretion and skill who, above all else, could be trusted to protect the prime minister's interests. Fallon and Hewitt asked Lancaster for the names of potential candidates, and he gave them only one. There was a family connection and, more important, an unpaid debt. Personal loyalty counted for much at times like these, said the prime minister, but leverage was far more practical.

Hence the quiet summons to Downing Street of Graham Seymour, the longtime deputy director of the British Security Service, otherwise known as MI5. Much later, Seymour would describe the encounter—conducted in the Study Room beneath a glowering portrait of Baroness Thatcher—as the most difficult of his career. He agreed to help the prime minister without hesitation because that was what a man like Graham Seymour did under circumstances such as these. Still, he made it clear that, were his involvement in the matter ever to become public, he would destroy those responsible.

Which left only the identity of the operative who would conduct the search. Like Lancaster before him, Graham Seymour had only one candidate. He did not share the name with the prime minister. Instead, using funds from one of MI5's many secret operational accounts, he booked a seat on that evening's British Airways flight to Tel Aviv. As the plane eased from the gate, he considered how best to make his approach. Personal loyalty counted for much at times like these, he thought, but leverage was far more practical.

3

JERUSALEM

IN THE HEART of Jerusalem, not far from the Ben Yehuda Mall, was a quiet, leafy lane known as Narkiss Street. The apartment house at Number Sixteen was small, just three stories in height, and was partially concealed behind a sturdy limestone wall and a towering eucalyptus tree growing in the front garden. The uppermost flat differed from the others in the building only in that it had once been owned by the secret intelligence service of the State of Israel. It had a spacious sitting room, a tidy kitchen filled with modern appliances, a formal dining room, and two bedrooms. The smaller of the two bedrooms, the one meant for a child, had been painstakingly converted into a professional artist's studio. But Gabriel still preferred to work in the sitting room, where the cool breeze from the open French doors carried away the stench of his solvents.

At the moment, he was using a carefully calibrated solution of acetone, alcohol, and distilled water, first taught to him in Venice by the master art restorer Umberto Conti. The mixture was strong enough to dissolve the surface contaminants and the old varnish but would do no harm to the artist's original brushwork. Now he dipped a hand-fashioned cotton swab into the solution and twirled it gently over the upturned breast of Susanna. Her gaze was averted and she seemed only vaguely aware of the two lecherous village elders watching her bathe from beyond her garden wall. Gabriel, who was unusually protective of women, wished he could intervene and spare her the trauma of what was to come—the false accusations, the trial, the death sentence. Instead, he worked the cotton swab gently over the surface of her breast and watched as her yellowed skin turned a luminous white.

When the swab became soiled, Gabriel placed it in an airtight flask to trap the fumes. As he prepared another, his eyes moved slowly over the surface of the painting. At present, it was attributed only to a follower of Titian. But the painting's current owner, the renowned London art dealer Julian Isherwood, believed it had come from the studio of Jacopo Bassano. Gabriel concurred—indeed, now that he had exposed some of the brushwork, he saw evidence of the master himself, especially in the figure of Susanna. Gabriel knew Bassano's style well; he had studied his paintings extensively while serving his apprenticeship and had once spent several months in Zurich restoring an important Bassano for a private collector. On the final night of his stay, he had killed a man named Ali Abdel Hamidi in a wet alleyway near the river. Hamidi, a Palestinian master terrorist with much Israeli blood on his hands, had been posing as a playwright, and Gabriel had given him a death worthy of his literary pretensions.

Gabriel dipped the new swab into the solvent mixture, but before he could resume work he heard the familiar rumble of a heavy car engine in the street. He stepped onto the terrace to confirm his suspicions and then opened the front door an inch. A moment later Ari Shamron was perched atop a wooden stool at Gabriel's side. He wore khaki trousers, a white oxford cloth shirt, and a leather jacket with an unrepaired tear in the left shoulder. His ugly spectacles shone with the light of Gabriel's halogen work lamps. His face, with its deep cracks and fissures, was set in an expression of profound distaste.

"I could smell those chemicals the instant I stepped out of the car," Shamron said. "I can only imagine the damage they've done to your body after all these years."

"Rest assured it's nothing compared to the damage you've done," Gabriel replied. "I'm surprised I can still hold a paintbrush."

Gabriel placed the moistened swab against the flesh of Susanna and twirled it gently. Shamron frowned at his stainless steel wristwatch, as though it were no longer keeping proper time.

"Something wrong?" asked Gabriel.

"I'm just wondering how long it's going to take you to offer me a cup of coffee."

“You know where everything is. You practically live here now.”

Shamron muttered something in Polish about the ingratitude of children. Then he nudged himself off the stool and, leaning heavily on his cane, made his way into the kitchen. He managed to fill the teakettle with tap water but appeared perplexed by the various buttons and dials on the stove. Ari Shamron had twice served as the director of Israel’s secret intelligence service and before that had been one of its most decorated field officers. But now, in old age, he seemed incapable of the most basic of household tasks. Coffeemakers, blenders, toasters: these were a mystery to him. Gilah, his long-suffering wife, often joked that the great Ari Shamron, if left to his own devices, would find a way to starve in a kitchen filled with food.

Gabriel ignited the stove and then resumed his work. Shamron stood in the French doors, smoking. The stench of his Turkish tobacco soon overwhelmed the pungent odor of the solvent.

“Must you?” asked Gabriel.

“I must,” said Shamron.

“What are you doing in Jerusalem?”

“The prime minister wanted a word.”

“Really?”

Shamron glared at Gabriel through a cloud of blue-gray smoke. “Why are you surprised the prime minister would want to see me?”

“Because—”

“I am old and irrelevant?” Shamron asked, cutting him off.

“You are unreasonable, impatient, and at times irrational. But you have never been irrelevant.”

Shamron nodded in agreement. Age had given him the ability to at least see his own shortcomings, even if it had robbed him of the time needed to remedy them.

“How is he?” asked Gabriel.

“As you might imagine.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Our conversation was wide ranging and frank.”

“Does that mean you yelled at each other?”

“I’ve only yelled at one prime minister.”

“Who?” asked Gabriel, genuinely curious.

“Golda,” answered Shamron. “It was the day after Munich. I told her we had to change our tactics, that we had to terrorize the terrorists. I gave her a list of names, men who had to die. Golda wanted none of it.”

“So you yelled at her?”

“It was not one of my finer moments.”

“What did she do?”

“She yelled back, of course. But eventually she came around to my way of thinking. After that, I put together another list of names, the names of the young men I needed to carry out the operation. All of them agreed without hesitation.” Shamron paused, and then added, “All but one.”

Gabriel silently placed the soiled swab into the airtight flask. It trapped the noxious fumes of the solvent but not the memory of his first encounter with the man they called the Memuneh, the one in charge. It had taken place just a few hundred yards from where he stood now, on the campus of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. Gabriel had just left a lecture on the paintings of Viktor Frankel, the noted German Expressionist who also happened to be his maternal grandfather. Shamron was waiting for him at the edge of a sunbaked courtyard, a small iron bar of a man with hideous spectacles and teeth like a steel trap. As usual, he was well prepared. He knew that Gabriel had been raised on a dreary agricultural settlement in the Valley of Jezreel and that he had a passionate hatred of farming. He knew that Gabriel’s mother, a gifted artist in her own right, had managed to survive the death camp at Birkenau but was no match for the cancer that ravaged her body. He knew, too,

that Gabriel's first language was German and that it remained the language of his dreams. It was all in the file he was holding in his nicotine-stained fingers. "The operation will be called Wrath of God," he had said that day. "It's not about justice. It's about vengeance, pure and simple—vengeance for the eleven innocent lives lost at Munich." Gabriel had told Shamron to find someone else. "I don't want someone else," Shamron had responded. "I want you."

For the next three years, Gabriel and the other Wrath of God operatives stalked their prey across Europe and the Middle East. Armed with a .22-caliber Beretta, a soft-spoken weapon suitable for killing at close range, Gabriel personally assassinated six members of Black September. Whenever possible he shot them eleven times, one bullet for each Israeli butchered in Munich. When he finally returned home, his temples were the color of ash and his face was that of a man twenty years his senior. No longer able to produce original work, he went to Venice to study the craft of restoration. Then, when he was rested, he went back to work for Shamron. In the years that followed, he carried out some of the most fabled operations in the history of Israeli intelligence. Now, after many years of restless wandering, he had finally returned to Jerusalem. No one was more pleased by this than Shamron, who loved Gabriel as a son and treated the apartment on Narkiss Street as though it were his own. Once, Gabriel might have chafed under the pressure of Shamron's constant presence, but no more. The great Ari Shamron was eternal, but the vessel in which his spirit resided would not last forever.

Nothing had done more damage to Shamron's health than his relentless smoking. It was a habit he acquired as a young man in eastern Poland, and it had grown worse after he had come to Palestine, where he fought in the war that led to Israel's independence. Now, as he described his meeting with the prime minister, he flicked open his old Zippo lighter and used it to ignite another one of his foul-smelling cigarettes.

"The prime minister is on edge, more so than usual. I suppose he has a right to be. The great Arab Awakening has plunged the entire region into chaos. And the Iranians are growing closer to realizing their nuclear dreams. At some point soon, they will enter a zone of immunity, making it impossible for us to act militarily without the help of the Americans." Shamron closed his lighter with a snap and looked at Gabriel, who had resumed work on the painting. "Are you listening to me?"

"I'm hanging on your every word."

"Prove it."

Gabriel repeated Shamron's last statement verbatim. Shamron smiled. He regarded Gabriel's flawless memory as one of his finest accomplishments. He twirled the Zippo lighter in his fingertips. Two turns to the right, two turns to the left.

"The problem is that the American president refuses to lay down any hard-and-fast red lines. He says he will not allow the Iranians to build nuclear weapons. But that declaration is meaningless if the Iranians have the *capability* to build them in a short period of time."

"Like the Japanese."

"The Japanese aren't ruled by apocalyptic Shia mullahs," Shamron said. "If the American president isn't careful, his two most important foreign policy achievements will be a nuclear Iran and the restoration of the Islamic caliphate."

"Welcome to the post-American world, Ari."

"Which is why I think we're foolish to leave our security in their hands. But that's not the prime minister's only problem," Shamron added. "The generals aren't sure they can destroy enough of the program to make a military strike effective. And King Saul Boulevard, under the tutelage of your friend Uzi Navot, is telling the prime minister that a unilateral war with the Persians would be a catastrophe of biblical proportions."

King Saul Boulevard was the address of Israel's secret intelligence service. It had a long and deliberately misleading name that had very little to do with the true nature of its work. Even retired agents like Gabriel and Shamron referred to it as "the Office" and nothing else.

“Uzi is the one who sees the raw intelligence every day,” said Gabriel.

“I see it, too. Not all of it,” Shamron added hastily, “but enough to convince me that Uzi’s calculations about how much time we have might be flawed.”

“Math was never Uzi’s strong suit. But when he was in the field, he never made mistakes.”

“That’s because he rarely put himself in a position where it was possible to make a mistake.” Shamron lapsed into silence and watched the wind moving in the eucalyptus tree beyond the balustrade of Gabriel’s terrace. “I’ve always said that a career without controversy is not a proper career at all. I’ve had my share, and so have you.”

“And I have the scars to prove it.”

“And the accolades, too,” Shamron said. “The prime minister is concerned the Office is too cautious when it comes to Iran. Yes, we’ve inserted viruses into their computers and eliminated a handful of their scientists, but nothing has gone boom lately. The prime minister would like Uzi to produce another Operation Masterpiece.”

Masterpiece was the code name for a joint Israeli, American, and British operation that resulted in the destruction of four secret Iranian enrichment facilities. It had occurred on Uzi Navot’s watch, but within the corridors of King Saul Boulevard, it was regarded as one of Gabriel’s finest hours.

“Opportunities like Masterpiece don’t come along every day, Ari.”

“That’s true,” Shamron conceded. “But I’ve always believed that most opportunities are earned rather than bestowed. And so does the prime minister.”

“Has he lost confidence in Uzi?”

“Not yet. But he wanted to know whether I’d lost mine.”

“What did you say?”

“What choice did I have? I was the one who recommended him for the job.”

“So you gave him your blessing?”

“It was conditional.”

“How so?”

“I reminded the prime minister that the person I *really* wanted in the job wasn’t interested.” Shamron shook his head slowly. “You are the only man in the history of the Office who has turned down a chance to be the director.”

“There’s a first for everything, Ari.”

“Does that mean you might reconsider?”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“I thought you might enjoy the pleasure of my company,” Shamron countered. “And the prime minister and I were wondering whether you might be willing to do a bit of outreach to one of our closest allies.”

“Which one?”

“Graham Seymour dropped into town unannounced. He’d like a word.”

Gabriel turned to face Shamron. “A word about what?” he asked after a moment.

“He wouldn’t say, but apparently it’s urgent.” Shamron walked over to the easel and squinted at the pristine patch of canvas where Gabriel had been working. “It looks new again.”

“That’s the point.”

“Is there any chance you could do the same for me?”

“Sorry, Ari,” said Gabriel, touching Shamron’s deeply crevassed cheek, “but I’m afraid you’re beyond repair.”

4

KING DAVID HOTEL, JERUSALEM

ON THE AFTERNOON of July 22, 1946, the extremist Zionist group known as the Irgun detonated a large bomb in the King David Hotel, headquarters of all British military and civilian forces in Palestine. The attack, a reprisal for the arrest of several hundred Jewish fighters, killed ninety-one people, including twenty-eight British subjects who had ignored a telephone warning to evacuate the hotel. Though universally condemned, the bombing would quickly prove to be one of the most effective acts of political violence ever committed. Within two years, the British had retreated from Palestine, and the modern State of Israel, once an almost unimaginable Zionist dream, was a reality.

Among those fortunate enough to survive the bombing was a young British intelligence officer named Arthur Seymour, a veteran of the wartime Double Cross program who had recently been transferred to Palestine to spy on the Jewish underground. Seymour should have been in his office at the time of the attack but was running a few minutes late after meeting with an informant in the Old City. He heard the detonation as he was passing through the Jaffa Gate and watched in horror as part of the hotel collapsed. The image would haunt Seymour for the remainder of his life and shape the course of his career. Virulently anti-Israeli and fluent in Arabic, he developed uncomfortably close ties to many of Israel's enemies. He was a regular guest of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and an early admirer of a young Palestinian revolutionary named Yasir Arafat.

Despite his pro-Arab sympathies, the Office regarded Arthur Seymour as one of MI6's most capable officers in the Middle East. And so it came as something of a surprise when Seymour's only son, Graham, chose a career at MI5 rather than the more glamorous Secret Intelligence Service. Seymour the Younger, as he was known early in his career, served first in counterintelligence, working against the KGB in London. Then, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise in Islamic fanaticism, he was promoted to chief of counterterrorism. Now, as MI5's deputy director, he had been forced to rely on his expertise in both disciplines. There were more Russian spies plying their trade in London these days than at the height of the Cold War. And thanks to mistakes by successive British governments, the United Kingdom was now home to several thousand Islamic militants from the Arab world and Asia. Seymour referred to London as "Kandahar on the Thames." Privately, he worried that his country was sliding closer to the edge of a civilizational abyss.

Though Graham Seymour had inherited his father's passion for pure espionage, he shared none of his disdain for the State of Israel. Indeed, under his guidance, MI5 had forged close ties with the Office and, in particular, with Gabriel Allon. The two men regarded themselves as members of a secret brotherhood who did the unpleasant chores no one else was willing to do and worried about the consequences later. They had fought for one another, bled for one another, and in some cases killed for one another. They were as close as two spies from opposing services could be, which meant they distrusted each other only a little.

"Is there anyone in this hotel who doesn't know who you are?" Seymour asked, shaking Gabriel's outstretched hand as though it belonged to someone he was meeting for the first time.

"The girl at reception asked if I was here for the Greenberg bar mitzvah."

Seymour gave a discreet smile. With his pewter-colored locks and sturdy jaw, he looked the archetype of the British colonial baron, a man who decided important matters and never poured his own tea.

"Inside or out?" asked Gabriel.

"Out," said Seymour.

They sat down at a table outside on the terrace, Gabriel facing the hotel, Seymour the walls of the Old City. It was a few minutes after eleven, the lull between breakfast and lunch. Gabriel

drank only coffee but Seymour ordered lavishly. His wife was an enthusiastic but dreadful cook. For Seymour, airline food was a treat, and a hotel brunch, even from the kitchen of the King David, was an occasion to be savored. So, too, it seemed, was the view of the Old City.

“You might find this hard to believe,” he said between bites of his omelet, “but this is the first time I’ve ever set foot in your country.”

“I know,” Gabriel replied. “It’s all in your file.”

“Interesting reading?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing compared to what your service has on me.”

“How could it be? I am but a humble servant of Her Majesty’s Security Service. You, on the other hand, are a legend. After all,” Seymour added, lowering his voice, “how many intelligence officers can say they spared the world an apocalypse?”

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder and stared at the golden Dome of the Rock, Islam’s third-holiest shrine, sparkling in the crystalline Jerusalem sunlight. Five months earlier, in a secret chamber 167 feet beneath the surface of the Temple Mount, he had discovered a massive bomb that, had it detonated, would have brought down the entire plateau. He had also discovered twenty-two pillars from Solomon’s Temple of Jerusalem, thus proving beyond doubt that the ancient Jewish sanctuary, described in Kings and Chronicles, had in fact existed. Though Gabriel’s name never appeared in the press coverage of the momentous discovery, his involvement in the affair was well known in certain circles of the Western intelligence community. It was also known that his closest friend, the noted biblical archaeologist and Office operative Eli Lavon, had nearly died trying to save the pillars from destruction.

“You’re damn lucky that bomb didn’t go off,” Seymour said. “If it had, several million Muslims would have been on your borders in a matter of hours. After that . . .” Seymour’s voice trailed off.

“It would have been lights out on the enterprise known as the State of Israel,” Gabriel said, finishing Seymour’s thought for him. “Which is exactly what the Iranians and their friends in Hezbollah wanted to happen.”

“I can’t imagine what it must have been like when you saw those pillars for the first time.”

“To be honest, Graham, I didn’t have time to enjoy the moment. I was too busy trying to keep Eli alive.”

“How is he?”

“He spent two months in the hospital, but he looks almost as good as new. He’s actually back at work.”

“For the Office?”

Gabriel shook his head. “He’s digging in the Western Wall Tunnel again. I can arrange a private tour if you like. In fact, if you’re interested, I can show you the secret passage that leads directly into the Temple Mount.”

“I’m not sure my government would approve.” Seymour lapsed into silence while a waiter refilled their coffee cups. Then, when they were alone again, he said, “So the rumor is true after all.”

“Which rumor is that?”

“The one about the prodigal son finally returning home. It’s funny,” he added, smiling sadly, “but I always assumed you’d spend the rest of your life walking the cliffs of Cornwall.”

“It’s beautiful there, Graham. But England is your home, not mine.”

“Sometimes even I don’t feel at home there any longer,” Seymour said. “Helen and I recently purchased a villa in Portugal. Soon I’ll be an exile, like you used to be.”

“How soon?” asked Gabriel.

“Nothing’s imminent,” Seymour answered. “But eventually all good things must end.”

“You’ve had a great career, Graham.”

“Have I? It’s difficult to measure success in the security business, isn’t it? We’re judged on things that *don’t* happen—the secrets that *aren’t* stolen, the buildings that *don’t* explode. It can be a profoundly unsatisfying way of earning a living.”

“What are you going to do in Portugal?”

“Helen will attempt to poison me with her exotic cooking, and I will paint dreadful watercolor landscapes.”

“I never knew you painted.”

“For good reason.” Seymour frowned at the view as though it was far beyond the reach of his brush and palette. “My father would be spinning in his grave if he knew I was here.”

“So why *are* you here?”

“I was wondering whether you might be willing to find something for a friend of mine.”

“Does the friend have a name?”

Seymour made no reply. Instead, he opened his attaché case and withdrew an eight-by-ten photograph, which he handed to Gabriel. It showed an attractive young woman staring directly into the camera, holding a three-day-old copy of the *International Herald Tribune*.

“Madeline Hart?” asked Gabriel.

Seymour nodded. Then he handed Gabriel a sheet of A4 paper. On it was a single sentence composed in a plain sans serif typeface:

You have seven days, or the girl dies.

“Shit,” said Gabriel softly.

“I’m afraid it gets better.”

Coincidentally, the management of the King David had placed Graham Seymour, the only son of Arthur Seymour, in the same wing of the hotel that had been destroyed in 1946. In fact, Seymour’s room was just down the hall from the one his father had used as an office during the waning days of the British Mandate in Palestine. Arriving, they found the DO NOT DISTURB sign still hanging from the latch, along with a sack containing the *Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*. Seymour led Gabriel inside. Then, satisfied the room had not been entered in his absence, he inserted a DVD into his notebook computer and clicked PLAY. A few seconds later Madeline Hart, missing British subject and employee of Britain’s governing party, appeared on the screen.

“I made love to Prime Minister Jonathan Lancaster for the first time at the Party conference in Manchester in October 2012 ...”

5

KING DAVID HOTEL, JERUSALEM

THE VIDEO WAS seven minutes and twelve seconds in length. Throughout, Madeline's gaze remained fixed on a point slightly to the camera's left, as if she were responding to questions posed by a television interviewer. She appeared frightened and fatigued as, reluctantly, she described how she had met the prime minister during one of his visits to the Party's Millbank headquarters. Lancaster had expressed admiration for Madeline's work and on two occasions invited her to Downing Street to personally brief him. It was at the end of the second visit when he admitted that his interest in Madeline was more than professional. Their first sexual encounter had been a hurried affair in a Manchester hotel room. After that, Madeline had been spirited into the Downing Street residence by an old friend of the prime minister, always when Diana Lancaster was away from London.

"And now," said Seymour gloomily as the computer screen turned to black, "the prime minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is being punished for his sins with a crude attempt at blackmail."

"There's nothing crude about it, Graham. Whoever's behind this knew the prime minister was involved in an extramarital affair. And then they managed to make his lover disappear without a trace from Corsica. They're obviously extremely sophisticated."

Seymour ejected the disk from the computer but said nothing.

"Who else knows?"

Seymour explained how the three items—the photograph, the note, and the DVD—had been left the previous morning on Simon Hewitt's doorstep. And how Hewitt had transported them to Downing Street, where he showed them to Jeremy Fallon. And how Hewitt and Fallon had then confronted Lancaster in his office at Number Ten. Gabriel, a recent resident of the United Kingdom, knew the cast of characters well. Hewitt, Fallon, Lancaster: the holy trinity of British politics. Hewitt was the spin doctor, Fallon the master schemer and strategist, and Lancaster the raw political talent.

"Why did Lancaster choose you?" asked Gabriel.

"Our fathers worked together in the intelligence service."

"Surely there's more to it than that."

"There is," Seymour admitted. "His name is Siddiq Hussein."

"I'm afraid it doesn't ring a bell."

"That's not surprising," Seymour said. "Because, thanks to me, Siddiq disappeared down a black hole several years ago, never to be seen or heard from again."

"Who was he?"

"Siddiq Hussein was a Pakistani-born resident of Tower Hamlets in East London. He popped up on our radar screens after the bombings in 2007 when we finally came to our senses and started pulling Islamic radicals off the streets. You remember those days," Seymour said bitterly. "The days when the leftists and the media insisted we do something about the terrorists in our midst."

"Go on, Graham."

"Siddiq was hanging around with known extremists at the East London Mosque, and his mobile phone number kept appearing in all the wrong places. I gave a copy of his file to Scotland Yard, but the Counterterrorism Command said there wasn't enough evidence to move against him. Then Siddiq did something that gave me a chance to take care of the problem on my own."

"What was that?"

"He booked an airline ticket to Pakistan."

"Big mistake."

"Fatal, actually," said Seymour darkly.

“What happened?”

“We followed him to Heathrow and made sure he boarded his flight to Karachi. Then I placed a quiet call to an old friend in Langley, Virginia. I believe you know him well.”

“Adrian Carter.”

Seymour nodded. Adrian Carter was the director of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service. He oversaw the Agency’s global war on terror, including its once-secret programs to detain and interrogate high-value operatives.

“Carter’s team watched Siddiq in Karachi for three days,” Seymour continued. “Then they threw a bag over his head and put him on the first black flight out of the country.”

“Where did they take him?”

“Kabul.”

“The Salt Pit?”

Seymour nodded slowly.

“How long did he last?”

“That depends on whom you ask. According to the Agency’s account of the events, Siddiq was found dead in his cell ten days after arriving in Kabul. His family alleged in a lawsuit that he died while being tortured.”

“What does this have to do with the prime minister?”

“When the lawyers representing Siddiq’s family asked for all MI5 documents related to his case, Lancaster’s government refused to release them on grounds it would damage British national security. He saved my career.”

“And now you’re going to repay that debt by trying to save his neck?” When Seymour made no reply, Gabriel said, “This is going to end badly, Graham. And when it does, your name will feature prominently in the inevitable inquest.”

“I’ve made it clear that, if that happens, I’ll take everyone down with me, including Lancaster.”

“I never had you figured for the naive type, Graham.”

“I’m anything but.”

“So walk away. Go back to London and tell your prime minister to go before the cameras with his wife at his side and make a public appeal for the kidnappers to release the girl.”

“It’s too late for that. Besides,” Seymour added, “perhaps I’m a bit old-fashioned, but I don’t like it when people try to blackmail the leader of my country.”

“Does the leader of your country know you’re in Jerusalem?”

“Surely you jest.”

“Why me?”

“Because if MI5 or the intelligence service tries to find her, it will leak, just the way Siddiq Hussein leaked. You’re also damn good at finding things,” Seymour added quietly. “Ancient pillars, stolen Rembrandts, secret Iranian enrichment facilities.”

“Sorry, Graham, but—”

“And because you owe Lancaster, too,” Seymour said, cutting him off.

“Me?”

“Who do you think allowed you to take refuge in Cornwall under a false name when no other country would have you? And who do you think allowed you to recruit a British journalist when you needed to penetrate Iran’s nuclear supply chain?”

“I didn’t realize we were keeping score, Graham.”

“We’re not,” said Seymour. “But if we were, you would surely be trailing in the match.”

The two men lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, as though embarrassed by the tone of the exchange. Seymour looked at the ceiling, Gabriel at the note.

You have seven days, or the girl dies ...

“Rather vague, don’t you think?”

“But highly effective,” said Seymour. “It certainly got Lancaster’s attention.”

“No demands?”

Seymour shook his head. “Obviously, they want to name their price at the last minute. And they want Lancaster to be so desperate to save his political hide, he’ll agree to pay it.”

“How much is your prime minister worth these days?”

“The last time I had a peek at his bank accounts,” Seymour said facetiously, “he had upward of a hundred million.”

“Pounds?”

Seymour nodded. “Jonathan Lancaster made millions in the City, inherited millions from his family, and married millions in the form of Diana Baldwin. He’s a perfect target, a man with more money than he needs and a great deal to lose. Diana and the children live within the security bubble of Number Ten, which means it would be almost impossible for a kidnapper to get them. But Lancaster’s mistress ...” Seymour’s voice trailed off. Then he added, “A mistress is an altogether different matter.”

“I don’t suppose Lancaster has mentioned any of this to his wife?”

Seymour made a gesture with his hands to indicate he wasn’t privy to the inner workings of the Lancaster marriage.

“Have you ever worked a kidnapping case, Graham?”

“Not since Northern Ireland. And those were all IRA-related.”

“Political kidnappings are different from criminal kidnappings,” Gabriel said. “Your average political kidnapper is a rational fellow. He wants comrades released from prison or a policy changed, so he grabs an important politician or a busload of schoolchildren and holds them hostage until his demands are met. But a criminal wants only money. And if you pay him, it makes him want *more* money. So he keeps asking for money until he thinks there’s none left.”

“Then I suppose that leaves us only one option.”

“What’s that?”

“Find the girl.”

Gabriel walked to the window and stared across the valley toward the Temple Mount; and for an instant he was back in a secret cavern 167 feet beneath the surface, holding Eli Lavon as his blood pumped into the heart of the holy mountain. During the long nights Gabriel had spent next to Lavon’s hospital bed, he had vowed to never again set foot on the secret battlefield. But now an old friend had risen from the depths of his tangled past to request a favor. And once more Gabriel was struggling to find the words to send him away empty-handed. As the only child of Holocaust survivors, it was not in his nature to disappoint others. He made accommodations for them, but he rarely told them no.

“Even if I’m able to find her,” he said after a moment, “the kidnappers will still have the video of her confessing an affair with the prime minister.”

“But that video will have a rather different impact if the English rose is safely back on English soil.”

“Unless the English rose decides to tell the truth.”

“She’s a Party loyalist. She wouldn’t dare.”

“You have no idea what they’ve done to her,” Gabriel responded. “She could be an entirely different person by now.”

“True,” said Seymour. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. This conversation is meaningless unless you and your service undertake an operation to find Madeline Hart on my behalf.”

“I don’t have the authority to place my service at your disposal, Graham. It’s Uzi’s decision to make, not mine.”

“Uzi’s already given his approval,” Seymour said flatly. “So has Shamron.”

Gabriel glared at Seymour in disapproval but said nothing.

“Do you really think Ari Shamron would have let me within a mile of you without knowing why I was in town?” Seymour asked. “He’s very protective of you.”

“He has a funny way of showing it. But I’m afraid there’s one person in Israel who’s more powerful than Shamron, at least when it comes to me.”

“Your wife?”

Gabriel nodded.

“We have seven days, or the girl dies.”

“Six days,” said Gabriel. “The girl could be anywhere in the world, and we don’t have a single clue.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

Seymour reached into his briefcase and produced two Interpol photographs of the man with whom Madeline Hart had lunched on the afternoon of her disappearance. The man whose shoes left no marks. The forgotten man.

“Who is he?” asked Gabriel.

“Good question,” said Seymour. “But if you can find him, I suspect you’ll find Madeline Hart.”

6

ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

GABRIEL TOOK A single item from Graham Seymour, the photograph of a captive Madeline Hart, and carried it westward across Jerusalem, to the Israel Museum. After leaving his car in the staff parking lot, a privilege only recently granted to him, he made his way through the soaring glass entrance hall to the room that housed the museum's collection of European art. In one corner hung nine Impressionist paintings that had once been in the possession of a Swiss banker named Augustus Rolfe. A placard described the long journey the paintings had taken from Paris to this spot—how they had been looted by the Nazis in 1940, and how they were later transferred to Rolfe in exchange for services rendered to German intelligence. The placard made no mention of the fact that Gabriel and Rolfe's daughter, the renowned violinist Anna Rolfe, had discovered the paintings in a Zurich bank vault—or that a consortium of Swiss businessmen had hired a professional assassin from Corsica to kill them both.

In the adjoining gallery hung works by Israeli artists. There were three canvases by Gabriel's mother, including a haunting depiction of the death march from Auschwitz in January 1945 that she had painted from memory. Gabriel spent several moments admiring her draftsmanship and brushwork before heading outside into the sculpture garden. At the far end stood the beehive-shaped Shrine of the Book, repository of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Next to it was the museum's newest structure, a modern glass-and-steel building, sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. For now, it was cloaked in an opaque construction tarpaulin that rendered its contents, the twenty-two pillars of Solomon's Temple, invisible to the outside world.

There were well-armed security men standing along both sides of the building and at its entrance, which faced east, as had Solomon's original Temple. It was just one element of the exhibit that had made it arguably the most controversial curatorial project the world had ever known. Israel's ultra-Orthodox haredim had denounced the exhibit as an affront to God that would ultimately lead to the destruction of the Jewish state, while in Arab East Jerusalem the keepers of the Dome of the Rock declared the pillars an elaborate hoax. "There was never an actual Temple on the Temple Mount," the grand mufti of Jerusalem wrote in an op-ed published in the *New York Times*, "and no museum exhibit will ever change that fact."

Despite the fierce religious and political battles raging around the exhibit, it had progressed with remarkable speed. Within a few weeks of Gabriel's discovery, architectural plans had been approved, funds raised, and ground broken. Much of the credit belonged to the project's Italian-born director and chief designer. In public she was referred to by her maiden name, which was Chiara Zolli. But all those associated with the project knew that her real name was Chiara Allon.

The pillars were arranged in the same manner in which Gabriel had found them, in two straight columns separated by approximately twenty feet. One, the tallest, was blackened by fire—the fire the Babylonians had set the night they brought low the Temple that the ancient Jews regarded as the dwelling place of God on earth. It was the pillar Eli Lavon had clung to as he was near death, and it was there that Gabriel found Chiara. She was holding a clipboard in one hand and with the other was gesturing toward the glass ceiling. She wore faded jeans, flat-soled sandals, and a sleeveless white pullover that clung tightly to the curves of her body. Her bare arms were very dark from the Jerusalem sun; her riotous long hair was full of golden highlights. She looked astonishingly beautiful, thought Gabriel, and far too young to be the wife of a battered wreck like him.

Overhead two technicians were making adjustments to the exhibit's lighting while Chiara supervised from below. She spoke to them in Hebrew, with a distinct Italian accent. The daughter of the chief rabbi of Venice, she had spent her childhood in the insular world of the ancient ghetto,

leaving just long enough to earn a master's degree in Roman history from the University of Padua. She returned to Venice after graduation and took a job at the small Jewish museum in the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, and there she might have remained forever had an Office talent spotter not noticed her during a visit to Israel. The talent spotter introduced himself in a Tel Aviv coffeehouse and asked Chiara whether she was interested in doing more for the Jewish people than working in a museum in a dying ghetto.

After spending a year in the Office's secretive training program, Chiara returned to Venice, this time as an undercover agent of Israeli intelligence. Among her first assignments was to covertly watch the back of a wayward Office assassin named Gabriel Allon, who had come to Venice to restore Bellini's San Zaccaria altarpiece. She revealed herself to him a short time later in Rome, after an incident involving gunplay and the Italian police. Trapped alone with Chiara in a safe flat, Gabriel had wanted desperately to touch her. He had waited until the case was resolved and they had returned to Venice. There, in a canal house in Cannaregio, they made love for the first time, in a bed prepared with fresh linen. It was like making love to a figure painted by the hand of Veronese.

Now the figure turned her head and, noticing Gabriel's presence for the first time, smiled. Her eyes, wide and oriental in shape, were the color of caramel and flecked with gold, a combination that Gabriel had never been able to accurately reproduce on canvas. It had been many months since Chiara had agreed to sit for him; the exhibit had left her with little time for anything else. It was a distinct change in the pattern of their marriage. Usually, it was Gabriel who was consumed by a project, be it a painting or an operation, but now the roles were reversed. Chiara, a natural organizer who was meticulous in all things, had thrived under the intense pressure of the exhibit. But secretly Gabriel was looking forward to the day he could have her back.

She walked to the next pillar and examined the way the light was falling across it. "I called the apartment a few minutes ago," she said, "but there was no answer."

"I was having brunch with Graham Seymour at the King David."

"How lovely," she said sardonically. Then, still studying the pillar, she asked, "What's in the envelope?"

"A job offer."

"Who's the artist?"

"Unknown."

"And the subject matter?"

"A girl named Madeline Hart."

Gabriel returned to the sculpture garden and sat on a bench overlooking the tan hills of West Jerusalem. A few minutes later Chiara joined him. A soft autumnal wind moved in her hair. She brushed a stray tendril from her face and then crossed one long leg over the other so that her sandal dangled from her suntanned toes. Suddenly, the last thing Gabriel wanted to do was to leave Jerusalem and go looking for a girl he didn't know.

"Let's try this again," she said at last. "What's in the envelope?"

"A photograph."

"What kind of photograph?"

"Proof of life."

Chiara held out her hand. Gabriel hesitated.

"Are you sure?"

When Chiara nodded, Gabriel surrendered the envelope and watched as she lifted the flap and removed the print. As she examined the image, a shadow fell across her face. It was the shadow of a Russian arms dealer named Ivan Kharkov. Gabriel had taken everything from Ivan: his business, his money, his wife and children. Then Ivan had retaliated by taking Chiara. The operation to rescue

her was the bloodiest of Gabriel's long career. Afterward, he had killed eleven of Ivan's operatives in retaliation. Then, on a quiet street in Saint-Tropez, he had killed Ivan, too. Yet even in death, Ivan remained a part of their lives. The ketamine injections his men had given Chiara had caused her to lose the child she was carrying. Untreated, the miscarriage had damaged her ability to conceive. Privately, she had all but given up hope she would ever become pregnant again.

She returned the photograph to the envelope and the envelope to Gabriel. Then she listened intently as he described how the case had ended up in Graham Seymour's lap, then in his.

"So the British prime minister is forcing Graham Seymour to do his dirty work for him," she said when Gabriel had finished, "and Graham is doing the same to you."

"He's been a good friend."

Chiara's face was expressionless. Her eyes, usually a reliable window into her thoughts, were concealed behind sunglasses.

"What do you suppose they want?" she asked after a moment.

"Money," said Gabriel. "They always want money."

"Almost always," responded Chiara. "But sometimes they want things that are impossible to surrender."

She removed her sunglasses and hung them from the front of her shirt. "How long do you have before they kill her?" she asked. And when Gabriel answered, she shook her head slowly. "It can't be done," she said. "You can't possibly find her in that amount of time."

"Look at the building behind you. Then tell me if you still feel the same way."

Chiara looked at nothing other than Gabriel's face. "The French police have been searching for Madeline Hart for over a month. What makes you think you can find her?"

"Maybe they haven't been looking in the right place—or talking to the right people."

"Where would you start?"

"I've always believed the best place to begin an investigation is the scene of the crime."

Chiara removed her sunglasses from the front of her shirt and absently polished the lenses against her jeans. Gabriel knew it was a bad sign. Chiara always cleaned things when she was annoyed.

"You'll scratch them if you don't stop," he said.

"They're filthy," she replied distantly.

"Maybe you should get a case instead of just throwing them into your purse."

She made no response.

"You surprise me, Chiara."

"Why?"

"Because you know better than anyone that Madeline Hart is in hell. And she's going to stay in hell until someone brings her out."

"I just wish it could be someone else."

"There is no one else."

"No one like you." She examined the lenses of her sunglasses and frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"They're scratched."

"I told you you'd scratch them."

"You're always right, darling."

She slipped on the glasses and looked across the city. "I assume Shamron and Uzi have given their blessing?"

"Graham went to them before talking to me."

"How clever of him." She uncrossed her legs and rose. "I should be getting back. We don't have much time left before the opening."

"You've done a magnificent job, Chiara."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

“It was worth a try.”

“When will I see you again?”

“I only have seven days to find her.”

“Six,” she corrected him. “Six days or the girl dies.”

She leaned down and kissed his lips softly. Then she turned and walked across the sun-bleached garden, her hips swinging gently, as if to music only she could hear. Gabriel watched until she disappeared into the tarpaulin-covered building. Suddenly, the last thing he wanted to do was to leave Jerusalem and go looking for a girl he didn’t know.

Gabriel returned to the King David Hotel to collect the rest of the dossier from Graham Seymour—the demand note that contained no demand, the DVD of Madeline’s confession, and the two photographs of the man from Les Palmiers in Calvi. In addition, he requested a copy of Madeline’s Party personnel file, deliverable to an address in Nice.

“How did it go with Chiara?” asked Seymour.

“At this moment, my marriage might be in worse shape than Lancaster’s.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Leave town as quickly as possible. And don’t mention my name to your prime minister or anyone else at Downing Street.”

“How do I contact you?”

“I’ll send up a flare when I have news. Until then, I don’t exist.”

It was with those words that Gabriel took his leave. Returning to Narkiss Street, he found, resting on the coffee table in plain sight, a money belt containing two hundred thousand dollars. Next to it was a ticket for the 4:00 p.m. flight to Paris. It had been booked under the name Johannes Klemp, one of his favorite aliases. Entering the bedroom, Gabriel packed a small overnight bag with Herr Klemp’s trendy German clothing, setting aside one outfit, a black suit and black pullover, for the plane ride. Then, standing before the bathroom mirror, he made a few subtle alterations to his own appearance—a bit of silver for his hair, a pair of rimless German spectacles, a pair of brown contact lenses to conceal his distinctive green eyes. Within a few minutes he scarcely recognized the face staring back at him. He was no longer Gabriel Allon, Israel’s avenging angel. He was Johannes Klemp of Munich, a man permanently ready to take offense, a small man with a chip balanced precariously on his insignificant shoulder.

After dressing in Herr Klemp’s black suit and dousing himself with Herr Klemp’s appalling cologne, he sat down at Chiara’s dressing table and opened her jewelry case. One item seemed curiously out of place. It was a strand of leather hung with a piece of red coral shaped like a hand. He removed it and slipped it into his pocket. Then, for reasons not known to him, he hung it round his neck and concealed it beneath Herr Klemp’s pullover.

Downstairs an Office sedan was idling in the street. Gabriel tossed his bag onto the backseat and climbed in after it. Then he glanced at his wristwatch, not at the time but at the date. It was September 27. It had once been his favorite day of the year.

“What’s your name?” he asked of the driver.

“Lior.”

“Where are you from, Lior?”

“Beersheba.”

“It was a good place to be a kid?”

“There are worse places.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-five.”

Twenty-five, thought Gabriel. Why did it have to be twenty-five? He looked at his wristwatch again. Not at the time. The date.

“What were your instructions?” he asked of the driver, who just happened to be twenty-five.

“I was told to take you to Ben Gurion.”

“Anything else?”

“They said you might want to make a stop along the way.”

“Who said that? Was it Uzi?”

“No,” replied the driver, shaking his head. “It was the Old Man.”

So, thought Gabriel. He remembered. He glanced at his watch again. *The date ...*

“Well?” asked the driver.

“Take me to the airport,” replied Gabriel.

“No stops?”

“Just one.”

The driver slipped the car into gear and eased slowly from the curb, as though he were joining a funeral procession. He didn't bother to ask where they were going. It was the twenty-seventh of September. And Shamron remembered.

They drove to the Garden of Gethsemane and then followed the narrow, winding path up the slope of the Mount of Olives. Gabriel entered the cemetery alone and walked through the sea of headstones, until he arrived at the grave of Daniel Allon, born September 27, 1988, died January 13, 1991. Died on a snowy night in the First District of Vienna, in a blue Mercedes automobile that was blown to bits by a bomb. The bomb had been planted by a Palestinian master terrorist named Tariq al-Hourani, on the direct orders of Yasir Arafat. Gabriel had not been the target; that would have been too lenient. Tariq and Arafat had wanted to punish him by forcing him to watch the death of his wife and child, so that he would spend the rest of his life grieving, like the Palestinians. Only one element of the plot had failed. Leah had survived the inferno. She lived now in a psychiatric hospital atop Mount Herzl, trapped in a prison of memory and a body destroyed by fire. Afflicted with a combination of post-traumatic stress syndrome and psychotic depression, she relived the bombing constantly. Occasionally, however, she experienced flashes of lucidity. During one such interlude, she had granted Gabriel permission to marry Chiara. *Look at me, Gabriel. There's nothing left of me. Nothing but a memory.*

Gabriel glanced at his wristwatch again. Not the date but the time. There was time for one last good-bye. One final torrent of tears. One final apology for failing to search the car for a bomb before allowing Leah to start the engine. Then he staggered from the garden of stone, on the day that used to be his favorite of the year, and climbed into the back of an Office sedan that was driven by a boy of twenty-five.

The boy had the good sense not to speak a word during the journey to the airport. Gabriel entered the terminal like a normal traveler but then went to a room reserved for Office personnel, where he waited for his flight to be called. As he settled into his first-class seat, he felt a wholly unprofessional urge to phone Chiara. Instead, using techniques taught to him in his youth by Shamron, he walled her from his thoughts. For now, there was no Chiara. Or Daniel. Or Leah. There was only Madeline Hart, the kidnapped mistress of British prime minister Jonathan Lancaster. As the plane rose into the darkening sky, she appeared to Gabriel, in oil on canvas, as Susanna bathing in her garden. And leering at her over the wall was a man with an angular face and a small, cruel mouth. The man without a name or country. The forgotten man.

7 CORSICA

THE CORSICANS SAY that, when approaching their island by boat, they can smell its unique scrubland vegetation long before they glimpse its rugged coastline rising from the sea. Gabriel experienced no such revelation of Corsica, for he journeyed to the island by air, arriving on the morning's first flight from Orly. It was only when he was behind the wheel of a rented Peugeot, heading south from the airport at Ajaccio, that he caught his first whiff of gorse, briar, rockrose, and rosemary spilling down from the hills. The Corsicans called it the *macchia*. They cooked with it, heated their homes with it, and took refuge in it in times of war and vendetta. According to Corsican legend, a hunted man could take to the *macchia* and, if he wished, remain undetected there forever. Gabriel knew just such a man. It was why he wore a red coral hand on a strand of leather around his neck.

After a half hour of driving, Gabriel left the coast road and headed inland. The scent of the *macchia* grew stronger, as did the walls surrounding the small hill towns. Corsica, like the ancient land of Israel, had been invaded many times—indeed, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Vandals had plundered Corsica so mercilessly that most of the island's inhabitants fled the coasts and retreated into the safety of the mountains. Even now, the fear of outsiders remained intense. In one isolated village, an old woman pointed at Gabriel with her index and little fingers in order to ward off the effects of the *occhju*, the evil eye.

Beyond the village, the road was little more than a single-lane track bordered on both sides by thick walls of *macchia*. After a mile he came to the entrance of a private estate. The gate was open but in the breach stood an off-road vehicle occupied by a pair of security guards. Gabriel switched off the engine and, placing his hands atop the steering wheel, waited for the men to approach. Eventually, one climbed out and came slowly over. He had a gun in one hand and another shoved into the waistband of his trousers. With only a movement of his thick eyebrows, he inquired about the purpose of Gabriel's visit.

“I wish to see the don,” Gabriel said in French.

“The don is a very busy man,” the guard replied in the Corsican dialect.

Gabriel removed the talisman from his neck and handed it over. The Corsican smiled.

“I'll see what I can do.”

It had never taken much to spark a blood feud on the island of Corsica. An insult. An accusation of cheating in the marketplace. The dissolution of an engagement. The pregnancy of an unmarried woman. After the initial spark, unrest inevitably followed. An ox would be killed, a prized olive tree would topple, a cottage would burn. Then the murders would start. And on it would go, sometimes for a generation or more, until the aggrieved parties had settled their differences or given up the fight in exhaustion.

Most Corsican men were more than willing to do their killing themselves. But there were some who needed others to do their blood work for them: notables who were too squeamish to get their hands dirty, or who were unwilling to risk arrest or exile; women who could not kill for themselves or had no male kin to do the deed on their behalf. People like these relied on professional killers known as *taddunaghiu*. Usually, they turned to the Orsati clan.

The Orsatis had fine land with many olive trees, and their oil was regarded as the sweetest in all of Corsica. But they did more than produce olive oil. No one knew how many Corsicans had died at the hands of Orsati assassins down through the ages, least of all the Orsatis themselves, but local lore

placed the number in the thousands. It might have been significantly higher were it not for the clan's rigorous vetting process. The Orsatis operated by a strict code. They refused to carry out a killing unless satisfied the party before them had indeed been wronged and blood vengeance was required.

That changed, however, with Don Anton Orsati. By the time he gained control of the family, the French authorities had managed to eradicate feuding and the vendetta in all but the most isolated pockets of the island, leaving few Corsicans with the need for the services of his *taddunaghiu*. With local demand in steep decline, Orsati had been left with no choice but to look for opportunities elsewhere, namely, across the water in mainland Europe. He now accepted almost every job offer that crossed his desk, no matter how distasteful, and his killers were regarded as the most reliable and professional on the Continent. In fact, Gabriel was one of only two people ever to survive an Orsati family contract.

Though Orsati descended from a family of Corsican notables, in appearance he was indistinguishable from the *paesanu* who guarded the entrance to his estate. Entering the don's large office, Gabriel found him seated at his desk wearing a bleached white shirt, loose-fitting trousers of pale cotton, and a pair of dusty sandals that looked as though they had been purchased at the local outdoor market. He was staring down at an old-fashioned ledger, his heavy face set in a frown. Gabriel could only wonder at the source of the don's displeasure. Long ago, Orsati had merged his two businesses into a single seamless enterprise. His modern-day *taddunaghiu* were all employees of the Orsati Olive Oil Company, and the murders they carried out were booked as orders for product.

Rising, Orsati extended a granite hand toward Gabriel without a trace of apprehension. "It is an honor to meet you, Monsieur Allon," he said in French. "Frankly, I expected to see you long ago. You have a reputation for dealing harshly with your enemies."

"My enemies were the Swiss bankers who hired you to kill me, Don Orsati. Besides," Gabriel added, "instead of giving me a bullet in the head, your assassin gave me that."

Gabriel nodded toward the talisman, which was lying on Orsati's desk next to the ledger. The don frowned. Then he picked up the charm by the leather strand and allowed the red coral hand to sway back and forth like the weight of a clock.

"It was a reckless thing to do," the don said at last.

"Leaving the talisman behind or letting me live?"

Orsati smiled noncommittally. "We have an old saying here in Corsica. *I solda un vèni micca cantendu*: Money doesn't come from singing. It comes from work. And around here, work means fulfilling contracts, even when they are taken out on famous violinists and Israeli intelligence officers."

"So you returned the money to the men who retained you?"

"They were Swiss bankers. Money was the last thing they needed." Orsati closed the ledger and laid the talisman on the cover. "As you might expect, I've been keeping a close eye on you over the years. You've been a very busy man since our paths crossed. In fact, some of your best work has been done on my turf."

"This is my first visit to Corsica," Gabriel demurred.

"I was referring to the south of France," Orsati replied. "You killed that Saudi terrorist Zizi al-Bakari in the Old Port of Cannes. And then there was that bit of unpleasantness with Ivan Kharkov in Saint-Tropez a few years ago."

"It was my understanding Ivan was killed by other Russians," Gabriel said evasively.

"You killed Ivan, Allon. And you killed him because he took your wife."

Gabriel was silent. Again the Corsican smiled, this time with the assurance of a man who knew he was right. "The *macchia* has no eyes," he said, "but it sees all."

"That's why I'm here."

"I assumed that was the case. After all, a man such as you surely has no need of a professional killer. You do that quite well all on your own."

Gabriel withdrew a bundle of cash from his coat pocket and placed it on Orsati's ledger of death, next to the talisman. The don ignored it.

"How can I help you, Allon?"

"I need some information."

"About?"

Without a word, Gabriel laid the photograph of Madeline Hart next to the money.

"The English girl?"

"You don't seem surprised, Don Orsati."

The Corsican said nothing.

"Do you know where she is?"

"No," Orsati answered. "But I have a good idea who took her."

Gabriel held up the photo of the man from Les Palmiers. Orsati nodded once.

"Who is he?" asked Gabriel.

"I don't know. I met him only once."

"Where?"

"It was in this office, a week before the English girl vanished. He sat in the very same chair where you're sitting now," Orsati added. "But he had more money than you, Allon. Much more."

8 CORSICA

IT WAS LUNCHTIME, Don Orsati's favorite time of the day. They adjourned to the terrace outside his office and sat at a table laid with mounds of Corsican bread, cheese, vegetables, and sausage. The sun was bright, and through a gap in the *laricio* pine Gabriel could glimpse the sea shimmering blue-green in the distance. The savor of the *macchia* was everywhere. It hung on the cool air and rose from the food; even Orsati seemed to radiate it. He dumped several inches of bloodred wine into Gabriel's glass and then set about hacking off several slices of the dense Corsican sausage. Gabriel didn't inquire about the source of the meat. As Shamron liked to say, sometimes it was better not to ask.

"I'm glad we didn't kill you," Orsati said, raising his wineglass a fraction of an inch.

"I can assure you, Don Orsati, the feeling is mutual."

"More sausage?"

"Please."

Orsati carved off two more thick slabs and deposited them on Gabriel's plate. Then he slipped on a pair of half-moon reading glasses and examined the photograph of the man from Les Palmiers. "He looks different in this picture," he said after a moment, "but it's definitely him."

"What's different?"

"The way he's wearing his hair. When he came to see me, it was oiled and combed close to the scalp. It was subtle," Orsati added, "but very effective."

"Did he have a name?"

"He called himself Paul."

"Last name?"

"For all I know, that *was* his last name."

"What language did our friend Paul speak?"

"French."

"Local?"

"No, he had an accent."

"What kind?"

"I couldn't place it," the don said, furrowing his heavy brow. "It was as if he learned his French from a tape recorder. It was perfect. But at the same time it wasn't quite right."

"I assume he didn't find your name in the telephone book."

"No, Allon, he had a reference."

"What sort of reference?"

"A name."

"Someone who hired you in the past."

"That's the usual kind."

"What kind of job was it?"

"The kind where two men enter a room and only one man comes out. And don't bother asking me the name of the reference," Orsati added quickly. "We're talking about my business."

With a slight inclination of his head, Gabriel indicated he had no desire to pursue the matter further, at least for the moment. Then he asked the don why the man had come to see him.

"Advice," answered Orsati.

"About what?"

“He told me he had some product to move. He said he needed someone with a fast boat. Someone who knew the local waters and could move at night. Someone who knew how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Product?”

“This might surprise you, but he didn’t go into specifics.”

“You assumed he was a smuggler,” said Gabriel, more a statement of fact than a question.

“Corsica is a major transit point for heroin moving from the Middle East into Europe. For the record,” the don added quickly, “the Orsatis do not deal in narcotics, though, on occasion, we have been known to eliminate prominent members of the trade.”

“For a fee, of course.”

“The bigger the player, the bigger the fee.”

“Were you able to accommodate him?”

“Of course,” the don said. Then, lowering his voice, he added, “Sometimes we have to move things at night ourselves, Allon.”

“Things like dead bodies?”

The don shrugged. “They are an unfortunate byproduct of our business,” he said philosophically. “Usually, we try to leave them where they fall. But sometimes the clients pay a bit extra to make them disappear forever. Our preferred method is to put them into concrete coffins and send them to the bottom of the sea. Only God knows how many are down there.”

“How much did Paul pay?”

“A hundred thousand.”

“What was the split?”

“Half for me, half for the man with the boat.”

“Only half?”

“He’s lucky I gave him that much.”

“And when you heard the English girl had gone missing?”

“Obviously, I was suspicious. And when I saw Paul’s picture in the newspapers ...” The don’s voice trailed off. “Let’s just say I wasn’t pleased. The last thing I need is trouble. It’s bad for business.”

“You draw the line at kidnapping young women?”

“I suspect you do, too.”

Gabriel said nothing.

“I meant no offense,” the don said genuinely.

“None taken, Don Orsati.”

The don loaded his plate with roasted peppers and eggplant and doused them in Orsati olive oil. Gabriel drank some of the wine, paid a compliment to the don, and then asked for the name of the man with the fast boat who knew the local waters. He did so as if it were the furthest thing from his thoughts.

“We’re getting into sensitive territory,” replied Orsati. “I do business with these people all the time. If they ever find out I betrayed them to someone like you, things would get messy, Allon.”

“I can assure you, Don Orsati, they will never know how I obtained the information.”

Orsati appeared unconvinced. “Why is this girl so important that the great Gabriel Allon is looking for her?”

“Let’s just say she has powerful friends.”

“Friends?” Orsati shook his head skeptically. “If you’re involved, there’s more to it than that.”

“You are very wise, Don Orsati.”

“The *macchia* has no eyes,” the don said cryptically.

“I need his name,” Gabriel said quietly. “He’ll never know where I got it.”

Orsati picked up his glass of the bloodred wine and lifted it to the sun. “If I were you,” he said after a moment, “I’d talk to a man named Marcel Lacroix. He might know something about where the girl went after she left Corsica.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Marseilles,” replied Orsati. “He keeps his boat in the Old Port.”

“Which side?”

“The south, opposite the art gallery.”

“What’s the boat called?”

“*Moondance*.”

“Nice,” said Gabriel.

“I can assure you there’s nothing nice about Marcel Lacroix or the men he works for. You need to watch your step in Marseilles.”

“This might come as a surprise to you, Don Orsati, but I’ve done this a time or two before.”

“That’s true. But you should have been dead a long time ago.” Orsati handed Gabriel the talisman. “Put it around your neck. It wards off more than just the evil eye.”

“Actually,” replied Gabriel, “I was wondering whether you had something a bit more powerful.”

“Like what?”

“A gun.”

The don smiled. “I have something better than a gun.”

Gabriel followed the road until it turned to dirt, and then he followed it a little farther. The old goat was waiting exactly where Don Orsati had said it would be, just before the sharp left-hand turn, in the shade of three ancient olive trees. As Gabriel approached, it rose from its resting place and stood in the center of the narrow track, its chin raised defiantly, as if daring Gabriel to attempt to pass. It had the markings of a palomino and a red beard. Like Gabriel, it was scarred from old battles.

He inched the car forward, hoping the goat would surrender its position without a fight, but the beast stood its ground. Gabriel looked at the gun Don Orsati had given to him. A Beretta 9mm, it was lying on the front passenger seat, fully loaded. One shot between the goat’s battered horns was all it would take to end the standoff, but it was not possible; the goat, like the three ancient olive trees, belonged to Don Casabianca. And if Gabriel so much as touched one hair on its wretched head, there would be a feud, and blood would be spilled.

Gabriel tapped the car horn twice, but the goat did not budge. Then, sighing heavily, he climbed out and attempted to reason with the beast—first in French, then Italian, and then, exasperated, in Hebrew. The goat responded by lowering its head and aiming it like a battering ram toward Gabriel’s midsection. But Gabriel, who believed the best defense was a good offense, charged first, flailing his arms and shouting like a madman. Surprised, the goat gave ground instantly and vanished through a gap in the *macchia*.

Gabriel quickly started back toward the open car door but stopped when he heard a sound, like the cackling of a mockingbird, in the distance. Turning, he looked up toward the ocher-colored villa anchored to the side of the next hill. Standing on the terrace was a blond-haired man dressed entirely in white. And though Gabriel could not be certain, it appeared the man was laughing uncontrollably.

9 CORSICA

THE MAN AWAITING Gabriel in the villa was not a Corsican—at least he had not been born one. His real name was Christopher Keller, and he had been raised in a solidly upper-middle-class home in the posh London district of Kensington. On Corsica, however, only Don Orsati and a handful of his men were aware of these facts. To the rest of the island, Keller was known simply as the Englishman.

The story of Christopher Keller's journey from Kensington to the island of Corsica was one of the more intriguing Gabriel had ever heard, which was saying something in itself. The only son of two Harley Street physicians, Keller had made it clear at an early age that he had no intention of following in his parents' footsteps. Obsessed with history, especially military history, he wanted to become a soldier. His parents forbade him to enter the military, and for a time he acceded to their wishes. He enrolled at Cambridge and began reading history and Oriental languages. He was a brilliant student, but in his second year he grew restless and one night vanished without a trace. A few days later he surfaced at his father's Kensington home, hair cut to the scalp, dressed in an olive-drab uniform. He had enlisted in the British army.

After completing his basic training, Keller joined an infantry unit, but his intellect, physical prowess, and lone-wolf attitude quickly captured the attention of the elite Special Air Service. Within days of his arrival at the Regiment's headquarters at Hereford, it became clear Keller had found his true calling. His scores in the "killing house," an infamous facility where recruits practice close-quarters combat and hostage rescue, were the highest ever recorded, while the instructors in the unarmed combat course wrote that they had never seen a man who possessed such an instinctual knack for the taking of human life. His training culminated with a forty-mile march across the windswept moorland known as the Brecon Beacons, an endurance test that had left men dead. Laden with a fifty-five-pound rucksack and a ten-pound assault rifle, Keller broke the course record by thirty minutes, a mark that stands to this day.

Initially, he was assigned to a Sabre squadron specializing in mobile desert warfare, but his career soon took another turn when a man from military intelligence came calling. The man was looking for a unique brand of soldier capable of performing close observation and other special tasks in Northern Ireland. He said he was impressed by Keller's linguistic skills and his ability to improvise and think on his feet. Was Keller interested? That same night Keller packed his kit and moved from Hereford to a secret base in the Scottish Highlands.

During his training, Keller displayed yet another remarkable gift. For years the British security and intelligence forces had struggled with the myriad of accents in Northern Ireland. In Ulster the opposing communities could identify each other by the sound of a voice, and the way a man uttered a few simple phrases could mean the difference between life and an appalling death. Keller developed the ability to mimic the intonations perfectly. He could even shift accents at a moment's notice—a Catholic from Armagh one minute, a Protestant from Belfast's Shankill Road the next, then a Catholic from the Ballymurphy housing estates. He operated in Belfast for more than a year, tracking known members of the IRA, picking up bits of useful gossip from the surrounding community. The nature of his work meant that he would sometimes go several weeks without contacting his control officers.

His assignment in Northern Ireland came to an abrupt end late one night when he was kidnapped in West Belfast and driven to a remote farmhouse in County Armagh. There he was accused of being a British spy. Keller knew the situation was hopeless, so he decided to fight his way out. By the time he left the farmhouse, four hardened terrorists from the Provisional Irish Republican Army were dead. Two had been virtually cut to pieces.

Keller returned to Hereford for what he thought would be a long rest and a stint as an instructor. But his stay ended in August 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Keller quickly rejoined his old Sabre unit and by January 1991 was in the western desert of Iraq, searching out the Scud missile launchers that were raining terror on Tel Aviv. On the night of January 28, Keller and his team located a launcher about one hundred miles northwest of Baghdad and radioed the coordinates to their commanders in Saudi Arabia. Ninety minutes later a formation of Coalition fighter-bombers streaked low over the desert. But in a disastrous case of friendly fire, the aircraft attacked the SAS squadron instead of the Scud site. British officials concluded the entire unit was lost, including Keller. His obituaries made no mention of his intelligence work in Northern Ireland, or of the four IRA fighters he had butchered in the farmhouse in County Armagh.

What British military officials did not realize, however, was that Keller had survived the incident without a scratch. His first instinct was to radio his base and request an extraction. Instead, enraged by the incompetence of his superiors, he started walking. Concealed beneath the robe and headdress of a desert Arab, and highly trained in the art of clandestine movement, Keller made his way through the Coalition forces and slipped undetected into Syria. From there, he hiked westward across Turkey, Greece, and Italy until he finally washed ashore in Corsica, where he fell into the waiting arms of Don Orsati. The don gave Keller a villa and a woman to help heal his many wounds. Then, when Keller was rested, the don gave him work. With his northern European looks and SAS training, Keller was able to fulfill contracts that were far beyond the capabilities of Orsati's Corsican-born *taddunaghiu*. One such contract had borne the names Anna Rolfe and Gabriel Allon. For reasons of conscience, Keller had been unable to carry it out, but professional pride had compelled him to leave behind the talisman—the talisman that Gabriel now held in the palm of his hand.

Remarkably, the two men had met once before, many years earlier, when Keller and several other SAS officers had come to Israel for training in the techniques of counterterrorism. On the final day of their stay, Gabriel had reluctantly agreed to deliver a classified lecture on one of his most daring operations—the 1988 assassination of Abu Jihad, the PLO's second-in-command, at his villa in Tunis. Keller had sat in the front row, hanging on Gabriel's every word; and afterward, during a group photo session, he had positioned himself at Gabriel's side. Gabriel had worn sunglasses and a hat to shield his identity, but Keller had stared directly into the camera. It was one of the last photographs ever taken of him.

Now, as Gabriel alighted from his rented car, the man who had once spared his life was standing in the open doorway of his Corsican hideaway. He was taller than Gabriel by a chiseled head and much thicker through the chest and shoulders. Twenty years in the Corsican sun had done much to alter his appearance. His skin was now the color of saddle leather, and his cropped hair was bleached from the sea. Only his blue eyes seemed to have remained unchanged. They were the same eyes that had watched Gabriel so intently as he had recounted the death of Abu Jihad. And the same eyes that had once granted him mercy on a rainy night in Venice, in another lifetime.

"I'd offer you lunch," Keller said in his clipped English accent, "but I hear you've already dined at Chez Orsati."

When Keller extended his hand toward Gabriel, the muscles of his arm coiled and bunched beneath his white pullover. Gabriel hesitated for an instant before finally grasping it. Everything about Christopher Keller, from his hatchet-like hands to his powerful spring-loaded legs, seemed to have been expressly designed for the purpose of killing.

"How much did the don tell you?" asked Gabriel.

"Enough to know that you have no business approaching a man like Marcel Lacroix without backup."

"I take it you know him?"

"He gave me a ride once."

"Before or after?"

“Both,” said Keller. “Lacroix did a stretch in the French army. He’s also spent time in some of the toughest prisons in the country.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed?”

“If you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.”

“Sun Tzu,” said Gabriel.

“You cited that passage during your lecture in Tel Aviv.”

“So you were listening after all.”

Gabriel slipped past Keller and entered the large great room of the villa. The furnishings were rustic and, like Keller, covered in white fabric. Piles of books stood on every flat surface, and on the walls hung several quality paintings, including lesser works by Cézanne, Matisse, and Monet.

“No security system?” asked Gabriel, looking around the room.

“None needed.”

Gabriel walked over to the Cézanne, a landscape painted in the hills near Aix-en-Provence, and ran his fingertip gently over the surface.

“You’ve done very well for yourself, Keller.”

“It pays the bills.”

Gabriel said nothing.

“You disapprove of the way I earn my living?”

“You kill people for money.”

“So do you.”

“I kill for my country,” replied Gabriel. “And only as a last resort.”

“Is that why you blew Ivan Kharkov’s brains all over that street in Saint-Tropez? For your country?”

Gabriel turned from the Cézanne and stared directly into Keller’s eyes. Any other man would have wilted under the intensity of Gabriel’s gaze, but not Keller. His powerful arms were folded casually across his chest, and one corner of his mouth was lifted into a half smile.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea after all,” said Gabriel.

“I know the players and I know the terrain. You’d be a fool not to use me.”

Gabriel made no reply. Keller was right; he was the perfect guide to the French criminal underground. And his physical and tactical skills would surely prove valuable before this affair was over.

“I can’t pay you,” said Gabriel.

“I don’t need money,” replied Keller, looking around the beautiful villa. “But I do need you to answer a few questions before we leave.”

“We have five days to find her, or she dies.”

“Five days is an eternity for men like us.”

“I’m listening.”

“Who are you working for?”

“The British prime minister.”

“I didn’t realize you were on speaking terms.”

“I was retained by someone inside British intelligence.”

“On the prime minister’s behalf?”

Gabriel nodded.

“What’s the prime minister’s connection to this girl?”

“Use your imagination.”

“My goodness.”

“Goodness has very little to do with this.”

“Who’s the prime minister’s friend inside British intelligence?”

Gabriel hesitated and then answered the question truthfully. Keller smiled.

“You know him?” asked Gabriel.

“I worked with Graham in Northern Ireland. He’s a pro’s pro. But like everyone else in England,” Keller added quickly, “Graham Seymour thinks I’m dead. Which means he can never know that I’m working with you.”

“You have my word.”

“There’s something else I want.”

Keller held out his hand. Gabriel surrendered the talisman.

“I’m surprised you kept it,” Keller said.

“It has sentimental value.”

Keller slipped the talisman around his neck. “Let’s go,” he said, smiling. “I know where we can get you another.”

The *signadora* lived in a crooked house in the center of the village, not far from the church. Keller arrived without an appointment, but the old woman did not seem surprised to see him. She wore a black frock and a black scarf over her tinder-dry hair. With a worried smile, she touched Keller’s cheek softly. Then, fingering the heavy cross around her neck, she turned her gaze toward Gabriel. Her task was to care for those afflicted with the evil eye. It was obvious she feared Keller had brought the very incarnation of the evil one into her home.

“Who is this man?” she asked.

“A friend,” replied Keller.

“Is he a believer?”

“Not like us.”

“Tell me his name, Christopher—his *real* name.”

“His name is Gabriel.”

“Like the archangel?”

“Yes,” said Keller.

She studied Gabriel’s face carefully. “He is an Israelite, yes?”

When Keller nodded his head, the old woman gave a mild frown of disapproval. Doctrinally, she regarded the Jews as heretics, but personally she had no quarrel with them. She opened the front of Keller’s shirt and touched the talisman hanging around his neck.

“Isn’t this the one you lost several years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you find it?”

“In the bottom of a very crowded drawer.”

The *signadora* shook her head reproachfully. “You’re lying to me, Christopher,” she said. “When will you learn that I can always tell when you’re lying?”

Keller smiled but said nothing. The old woman released her hold on the talisman and again touched Keller’s cheek.

“You’re leaving the island, Christopher?”

“Tonight.”

The *signadora* did not ask why; she knew exactly what Keller did for a living. In fact, she had once hired a young *taddunaghiu* named Anton Orsati to avenge the murder of her husband.

With a movement of her hand, she invited Keller and Gabriel to sit at the small wooden table in her parlor. Before them she placed a plate filled with water and a vessel of olive oil. Keller dipped his forefinger in the oil; then he held it over the plate and allowed three drops to fall onto the water. By the laws of physics, the oil should have gathered into a single gobbet. Instead, it shattered into a thousand droplets and soon there was no trace of it.

“The evil has returned, Christopher.”

“I’m afraid it’s an occupational hazard.”

“Don’t make jokes, my dearest. The danger is very real.”

“What do you see?”

She gazed intently into the liquid, as if in a trance. After a moment she asked quietly, “Are you looking for the English girl?”

Keller nodded, then asked, “Is she alive?”

“Yes,” the old woman answered. “She’s alive.”

“Where is she?”

“It is not in my power to tell you that.”

“Will we find her?”

“When she is dead,” the old woman said. “Then you will know the truth.”

“What can you see?”

She closed her eyes. “Water ... mountains ... an old enemy ...”

“Of mine?”

“No.” She opened her eyes and looked directly at Gabriel. “Of his.”

Without another word, she took hold of the Englishman’s hand and prayed. After a moment she began to weep, a sign the evil had passed from Keller’s body into hers. Then she closed her eyes and appeared to be sleeping. When she awoke she instructed Keller to repeat the trial of the oil and the water. This time the oil coalesced into a single drop.

“The evil is gone from your soul, Christopher.” Then, turning to Gabriel, she said, “Now him.”

“I’m not a believer,” said Gabriel.

“Please,” the old woman said. “If not for you, for Christopher.”

Reluctantly, Gabriel dipped his forefinger into the oil and allowed three drops to fall onto the surface of the water. When the oil shattered into a thousand pieces, the woman closed her eyes and began to tremble.

“What do you see?” asked Keller.

“Fire,” she said softly. “I see fire.”

There was a five o’clock ferry from Ajaccio. Gabriel eased his Peugeot into the car deck at half past four and then watched, ten minutes later, as Keller came aboard behind the wheel of a battered Renault hatchback. Their compartments were on the same deck, directly across the corridor. Gabriel’s was the size of a prison cell and equally inviting. He left his bag on the cot-size bed and headed upstairs to the bar. By the time he arrived, Keller was seated at a table near the window, a glass of beer raised to his lips, a cigarette smoldering in the ashtray. Gabriel shook his head slowly. Forty-eight hours earlier, he had been standing before a canvas in Jerusalem. Now he was searching for a woman he did not know, accompanied by a man who had once accepted a contract to kill him.

He ordered black coffee from the barman and stepped outside onto the aft deck. The ferry was beyond the outer reaches of the harbor and the evening air was suddenly cold. Gabriel turned up the collar of his coat and wrapped his hands around the cardboard coffee cup for warmth. The eastern stars shone brightly in the cloudless sky, and the sea, turquoise a moment earlier, was the color of India ink. Gabriel thought he could smell the *macchia* on the wind. Then, a moment later, he heard the voice of the *signadora*. When she is dead, the old woman was saying. Then you will know the truth.

10

MARSEILLES

WHEN GABRIEL AND Keller arrived in Marseilles early the next morning, *Moondance*, forty-two feet of seagoing smuggling power, was tied up in its usual slip in the Old Port. Its owner, however, was nowhere to be seen. Keller established a static observation post on the north side, Gabriel on the east, outside a pizzeria that inexplicably bore the name of a trendy Manhattan neighborhood. They moved to new positions at the top and bottom of each hour, but by late afternoon there was still no sign of Lacroix. Finally, anxious over the prospect of a lost day, Gabriel walked around the perimeter of the harbor, past the fishmongers at their metal tables, and joined Keller in the Renault. The weather was deteriorating: heavy rain, a cold mistral howling out of the hills. Keller flipped the wipers every few seconds to keep the windshield clear. The defroster panted weakly against the fogged glass.

“Are you sure he doesn’t keep an apartment in town?” asked Gabriel.

“He lives on the boat.”

“What about a woman?”

“He has several, but none can tolerate his presence for long.” Keller wiped the windshield with the back of his hand. “Maybe we should get a hotel room.”

“It’s a bit soon for that, don’t you think? After all, we’ve only just met.”

“Do you always make stupid wisecracks during operations?”

“It’s a cultural affliction.”

“Stupid wisecracks or operations?”

“Both.”

Keller dug a paper napkin from the glove box and did his best to rectify the mess he had made of the windshield. “My grandmother was Jewish,” he said casually, as though admitting that his grandmother had enjoyed playing bridge.

“Congratulations.”

“Another wisecrack?”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“You don’t find it interesting that I have a Jewish ancestor?”

“In my experience, most Europeans have a Jewish relative hidden somewhere in the woodpile.”

“Mine was hidden in plain sight.”

“Where was she born?”

“Germany.”

“She came to Britain during the war?”

“Right before,” said Keller. “She was taken in by a distant uncle who no longer considered himself Jewish. He gave her a proper Christian name and sent her to church. My mother didn’t know she had a Jewish past until she was in her mid-thirties.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Gabriel said, “but in my book, you’re Jewish.”

“To be honest with you, I’ve always felt a little Jewish.”

“You have an aversion to shellfish and German opera?”

“I was speaking in a spiritual sense.”

“You’re a professional assassin, Keller.”

“That doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in God,” Keller protested. “In fact, I suspect I know more about your history and scripture than you do.”

“So why are you hanging around with that crazy mystic?”

“She isn’t crazy.”

“Don’t tell me you believe all that nonsense.”

“How did she know we were looking for the girl?”

“I suppose the don must have told her.”

“No,” Keller said, shaking his head. “She saw it. She sees everything.”

“Like the water and the mountains?”

“Yes.”

“We’re in the south of France, Keller. I see water and mountains, too. In fact, I see them almost everywhere I look.”

“She obviously made you nervous with that talk about an old enemy.”

“I don’t get nervous,” said Gabriel. “As for old enemies, I can’t seem to walk out my front door without running into one.”

“Then perhaps you should move your front door.”

“Is that a Corsican proverb?”

“Just a friendly piece of advice.”

“We’re not exactly friends yet.”

Keller shrugged his square shoulders to convey indifference, injury, or something in between. “What did you do with the talisman she gave you?” he asked after a sulky silence.

Gabriel patted the front of his shirt to indicate that the talisman, which was identical to Keller’s, was hanging around his neck.

“If you don’t believe,” asked Keller, “why are you wearing it?”

“I like the way it accents my outfit.”

“Whatever you do, don’t ever take it off. It keeps the evil at bay.”

“I have a few people in my life I’d like to keep at bay.”

“Like Ari Shamron?”

Gabriel managed to hide his surprise. “How do you know about Shamron?” he asked.

“I met him when I came to Israel to train. Besides,” Keller added quickly, “everyone in the trade knows about Shamron. And everyone knows he wanted you to be the chief instead of Uzi Navot.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you read in the papers, Keller.”

“I have good sources,” said Keller. “And they tell me the job was yours for the taking but you turned it down.”

“You might find this hard to believe,” said Gabriel, staring wearily through the rain-spattered glass, “but I’m really not in the mood to take a stroll down memory lane with you.”

“I was just trying to help pass the time.”

“Perhaps we should enjoy a comfortable silence.”

“Another wisecrack?”

“You’d understand if you were Jewish.”

“Technically, I am Jewish.”

“Who do you prefer? Puccini or Wagner?”

“Wagner, of course.”

“Then you can’t possibly be Jewish.”

Keller lit a cigarette and waved out the match. A gust of wind hurled rain against the windshield, obscuring the view of the harbor. Gabriel lowered his own window a few inches to vent Keller’s smoke.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe we should get a hotel room after all.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary.”

“Why not?”

Keller flipped the wipers and pointed through the glass.

“Because Marcel Lacroix is headed our way.”

He wore a black tracksuit and neon-green trainers, and carried a Puma sports bag over one shoulder. Obviously, he had spent a good portion of the afternoon at the gym. Not that he needed it; Lacroix was at least six-foot-two and weighed well over two hundred pounds. His dark hair was oiled and pulled back into a short ponytail. He had studs in both ears and Chinese characters tattooed on the side of his thick neck, evidence he was a student of the Asian martial arts. His eyes never stopped moving, though they failed to register the two men seated in the battered Renault hatchback with fogged windows. Watching him, Gabriel sighed heavily. Lacroix would surely be a worthy opponent, especially within the tight confines of *Moondance*. Regardless of what anyone said, size mattered.

“No wisecracks?” asked Keller.

“I’m working on one.”

“Why don’t you let me handle it?”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because he knows you work for the don. And if you show up and start asking questions about Madeline Hart, he’ll know the don betrayed him, which will be detrimental to the don’s interests.”

“Let me worry about the don’s interests.”

“Is that why you’re here, Keller?”

“I’m here to make sure you don’t end up in a cement coffin at the bottom of the Mediterranean.”

“There are worse places to be buried.”

“Jewish law doesn’t permit burial at sea.”

Keller fell silent as Lacroix stepped onto the dock and started toward *Moondance*. Gabriel looked at the way the fabric of his tracksuit was falling across the small of the Frenchman’s back. Then he looked at the way the gym bag was hanging over his shoulder.

“What do you think?” asked Keller.

“I think he’s carrying his gun in the bag.”

“You noticed that, too?”

“I notice everything.”

“How are you going to handle it?”

“As quietly as possible.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Wait here,” said Gabriel, opening the car door. “And try not to kill anyone while I’m gone.”

The Office had a simple doctrine regarding the proper operational use of concealed firearms. It had been given by God to Ari Shamron—at least that was how the story went—and Shamron in turn had given it to all those who went secretly into the night to carry out his wishes. Though it appeared nowhere in written form, every field officer could recite it as easily as they could recite the Shabbat blessing of the candles. An Office agent draws his weapon for one reason and one reason only. He does not wave it around like a gangster or make idle threats. He draws his gun in order to fire it—and he does not stop firing it until the person at whom it is pointed is no longer among the living. Amen.

It was with Shamron’s admonition ringing in his ears that Gabriel walked the final steps toward *Moondance*. He hesitated before boarding; even a man with a build as slender as his would cause the boat to list slightly. Therefore, speed and an appearance of outward confidence were critical.

Gabriel cast one last glance over his right shoulder and saw Keller eyeing him warily through the driver’s-side window of the Renault. Then he climbed aboard *Moondance* and made his way quickly across the aft deck toward the doorway of the main cabin. Lacroix was on his feet in the passageway by the time Gabriel arrived. In the cramped quarters of the boat, the Frenchman seemed even larger than he had appeared on the street.

“What the fuck are you doing on my boat?” he asked quickly.

“I’m sorry,” Gabriel said, raising his palms in a placatory gesture. “I was told you would be expecting me.”

“Told by whom?”

“Paul, of course. Didn’t he tell you I was coming to see you?”

“Paul?”

“Yes, Paul,” said Gabriel assuredly. “The man who hired you to deliver the package from Corsica to the mainland. He said you were the best he’d ever seen. He said that if I ever needed someone to transport valuable goods, you were the person to handle the job.”

On the Frenchman’s face, Gabriel saw several competing reactions: confusion, apprehension, and, of course, greed. In the end, greed emerged victorious. He stepped aside and with a movement of his eyes invited Gabriel to enter. Gabriel took two languid steps forward while scanning the interior of the cabin for Lacroix’s gym bag. It was lying on a tabletop next to a bottle of Pernod.

“Do you mind?” asked Gabriel, nodding toward the open door. “It’s not the sort of thing I want your neighbors to hear.”

Lacroix hesitated for a moment. Then he walked over to the door and closed it. Gabriel positioned himself next to the table where the gym bag lay.

“What kind of job is it?” asked Lacroix, turning around.

“A very simple one. In fact, it will only take a few minutes.”

“How much?”

“What do you mean?” asked Gabriel, feigning bewilderment.

“How much money are you offering?” asked Lacroix, rubbing his first two fingers against his thumb.

“I’m offering you something much more valuable than money.”

“What’s that?”

“Your life,” said Gabriel. “You see, Marcel, you’re going to tell me what your friend Paul did with the English girl. And if you don’t, I’m going to cut you to pieces and use you as chum.”

The Israeli martial arts discipline known as Krav Maga is not known for its gracefulness, but then it was not designed with aesthetics in mind. Its sole purpose is to incapacitate or kill an adversary as quickly as possible. Unlike many Eastern disciplines, it does not frown upon the use of heavy objects to ward off an attacker of superior size and strength. In fact, instructors encourage their students to use whatever objects they have at their disposal to defend themselves. David did not grapple with Goliath, they are fond of saying. David hit Goliath with a rock. And only then did he cut off his head.

Gabriel chose not a rock but the bottle of Pernod, which he seized by the neck and hurled, daggerlike, toward the charging figure of Marcel Lacroix. Fittingly, it struck him in the center of the forehead, opening a deep horizontal gash just above the ridge of his heavy brow. Unlike Goliath, who instantly toppled onto his face, Lacroix managed to remain on his feet, though just barely. Gabriel lunged forward and drove a knee into the Frenchman’s unprotected groin. From there, he worked his way violently upward, pummeling Lacroix’s midsection before breaking his jaw with a well-placed elbow. A second elbow, delivered to the temple, put Lacroix on the floor. Gabriel reached down and touched the side of the Frenchman’s neck to make certain he still had a pulse. Then, looking up, he saw Keller standing in the doorway, smiling. “Very impressive,” he said. “The Pernod was a lovely touch.”

11

OFF MARSEILLES

THE RAIN DIED at sunset but the mistral blew without remorse long after dark. It sang in the riggings of the boats huddled in the Old Port and chased round the decks of *Moondance* as Keller guided it expertly out to sea. Gabriel remained by his side on the flying bridge until they were clear of the harbor. Then he headed downstairs to the main salon where Marcel Lacroix lay facedown on the floor, bound, gagged, and blinded by silver duct tape. Gabriel rolled the Frenchman onto his back and tore away the blinding layer of tape with a single rough movement. Lacroix had regained consciousness; in his eyes there was no sign of fear, only rage. Keller had been right. The Frenchman did not frighten easily.

Gabriel reapplied the duct tape blindfold and commenced a thorough search of the entire craft, beginning in the main salon and concluding in Lacroix's stateroom. It produced a cache of illegal narcotics, approximately sixty thousand euros in cash, false passports and French driver's permits in four different names, a hundred stolen credit cards, nine disposable cellular phones, an elaborate collection of print and electronic pornography, and a receipt with a telephone number scrawled on the back. The receipt was from a place called Bar du Haut on boulevard Jean Jaurès in Rognac, a working-class town north of Marseilles, not far from the airport. Gabriel had passed through it once in another lifetime. That was the kind of town Rognac was, a way station on a road to somewhere else.

Gabriel checked the date on the receipt. Then he searched the calling histories of the nine cell phones for the number written on the back. He found it on three of the phones. In fact, Lacroix had called it twice that morning using two different devices.

Gabriel slipped the cell phones, the receipt, and the cash into a nylon rucksack and returned to the main salon. Once again he tore the duct tape from Lacroix's eyes, but this time he removed the gag as well. Lacroix's face was now heavily distorted from the swelling caused by the broken jaw. Gabriel squeezed it tightly as he stared into the Frenchman's eyes.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, Marcel. You have one chance to tell me the truth. Do you understand?" Gabriel asked, squeezing a little harder. "One chance."

Lacroix made no response other than to groan in pain.

"One chance," Gabriel said again, holding up his index finger to emphasize the point. "Are you listening?"

Lacroix said nothing.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Gabriel. "Now, Marcel, I want you to tell me the names of the men who are holding the girl. And then I want you to tell me where I can find them."

"I don't know anything about a girl."

"You're lying, Marcel."

"No, I swear—"

Before Lacroix could utter another word, Gabriel silenced him by sealing his mouth once again. Next he wrapped several feet of additional tape around the Frenchman's head until only his nostrils were visible. Belowdecks he retrieved a length of nylon rope from a storage cabinet. Then he headed back upstairs to the flying bridge. Keller was clutching the wheel with both hands and squinting through the window at the turbulent seas.

"How's it going down there?" he asked.

"Surprisingly, I wasn't able to persuade him to cooperate."

"What's the rope for?"

"Additional persuasion."

"Anything I can do to help?"

“Reduce speed and put us on autopilot.”

Keller did as instructed and followed Gabriel down to the main salon. There they found Lacroix in obvious distress, his chest heaving as he struggled for air through the duct tape helmet. Gabriel rolled him onto his stomach and fed the nylon line through the bindings at his feet and ankles. After securing the line with a tight knot, he dragged Lacroix onto the afterdeck as though he were a freshly harpooned whale. Then, with Keller’s help, he lowered him onto the swim step and rolled him overboard. Lacroix struck the black water with a heavy thud and began to thrash wildly in an attempt to keep his head above the surface. Gabriel watched him for a moment and then scanned the horizon in all directions. Not a single light was visible. It seemed they were the last three men on earth.

“How will you know when he’s had enough?” asked Keller as he watched Lacroix fighting for his life.

“When he starts to sink,” replied Gabriel calmly.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Don’t ever get on my bad side.”

After forty-five seconds in the water, Lacroix went suddenly still. Gabriel and Keller hauled him quickly back on board and removed the duct tape from his mouth. For the next several minutes the Frenchman was unable to speak as he alternately gasped for air and coughed seawater from his lungs. When the retching finally stopped, Gabriel took hold of his broken jaw and squeezed.

“You might not realize it at this moment,” he said, “but this is your lucky day, Marcel. Now, let’s try this again. Tell me where I can find the girl.”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying to me, Marcel.”

“No,” Lacroix said, shaking his head violently from side to side. “I’m telling you the truth. I have no idea where she is.”

“But you know one of the men who’s holding her. In fact, you had drinks with him at a bar in Rognac a week after she disappeared. And you’ve been in contact with him ever since.”

Lacroix was silent. Gabriel squeezed the broken jaw harder.

“His name, Marcel. Tell me his name.”

“Brossard,” Lacroix gasped through the pain. “His name is René Brossard.”

Gabriel looked at Keller, who nodded his head.

“Very good,” he said to Lacroix, releasing his grip. “Now keep talking. And don’t even think about lying to me. If you do, you’ll go back in the water. But the next time it will be forever.”

12

OFF MARSEILLES

THERE WERE TWO opposing swivel chairs on the afterdeck. Gabriel secured Lacroix to the one on the starboard side and then lowered himself into the other. Lacroix remained blindfolded, his tracksuit sodden from his brief swim in the ocean. Shivering violently, he pleaded for a change of clothing or a blanket. Then, after receiving no answer, he recounted a warm evening in mid-August when a man had appeared unannounced on *Moondance*, just as Gabriel had earlier that afternoon.

“Paul?” asked Gabriel.

“Yes, Paul.”

“Had you ever met him before?”

“No, but I’d seen him around.”

“Where?”

“Cannes.”

“When?”

“The film festival.”

“This year?”

“Yes, in May.”

“You went to the Cannes Film Festival?”

“I wasn’t on the guest list, if that’s what you’re asking. I was working.”

“What kind of work?”

“What do you think?”

“Stealing from the movie stars and the beautiful people?”

“It’s one of our busiest weeks of the year, a real boon to the local economy. The people from Hollywood are total idiots. We rob them blind every time they come here, and they never even seem to notice.”

“What was Paul doing?”

“He was hanging out with the beautiful people. I think I actually saw him going into the hall a couple of times to see the films.”

“You think?”

“He always looks different.”

“He was running scams from the inside at Cannes?”

“You’d have to ask him. We didn’t discuss it when he came to see me. We only talked about the job.”

“He wanted to hire you and your boat to move the girl from Corsica to the mainland.”

“No,” said Lacroix, shaking his head vehemently. “He never said a word about a girl.”

“What *did* he say?”

“That he wanted me to deliver a package.”

“You didn’t ask what the package was?”

“No.”

“Is that the way you always operate?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“On how much money is on the table.”

“How much was there?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“Is that good?”

“Very.”

“Did he mention where he got your name?”

“He got it from the don.”

“Who’s the don?”

“Don Orsati, the Corsican.”

“What kind of work does the don do?”

“He’s got his fingers into all kinds of rackets,” answered Lacroix, “but mainly he kills people. Occasionally, I give one of his men a lift. And sometimes I help make things disappear.”

The purpose of Gabriel’s line of inquiry was twofold. It allowed him to test the veracity of Lacroix’s responses while at the same time covering his own tracks. Lacroix was now under the impression Gabriel had never had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a Corsican killer named Orsati. And, at least for the moment, he was answering Gabriel’s questions truthfully.

“Did Paul tell you when the job was supposed to go down?”

“No,” Lacroix answered, shaking his head. “He told me he would give me twenty-four hours’ notice, that I would probably hear from him in a week, ten days at most.”

“How was he going to contact you?”

“By phone.”

“Do you still have the phone you used?”

Lacroix nodded and then recited the number associated with the device.

“He called as planned?”

“On the eighth day.”

“What did he say?”

“He wanted me to pick him up the next morning at the cove just south of the Capo di Feno.”

“What time?”

“Three a.m.”

“How was the pickup supposed to work?”

“He wanted me to leave a dinghy on the beach and wait for him offshore.”

Gabriel looked up toward the flying bridge where Keller stood watching the proceedings. The Englishman nodded, as if to say there was indeed a suitable cove on the Capo di Feno and that the scenario as described by Lacroix was entirely plausible.

“When did you arrive on Corsica?” asked Gabriel.

“A few minutes after midnight.”

“You were alone?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I swear.”

“What time did you leave the dinghy on the beach?”

“Two.”

“How did you get back to *Moondance*?”

“I walked,” quipped Lacroix, “just like Jesus.”

Gabriel reached out and ripped the stud from Lacroix’s right ear.

“It was just a joke,” gasped the Frenchman as blood flowed from his ruined lobe.

“If I were you,” replied Gabriel, “I wouldn’t be making jokes about the Lord at a time like this. In fact, I would be doing everything I could to get on his good side.”

Gabriel glanced up toward the flying bridge again and saw Keller trying to suppress a smile. Then he asked Lacroix to describe the events that followed. Paul, the Frenchman said, had arrived right on schedule, at three o’clock sharp. Lacroix had seen a single vehicle, a small four-wheel-drive, bumping down the steep track from the cliff tops to the cove with only its parking lamps burning.

Then he had heard the throb of the dinghy's outboard echoing back at him across the water. Then, when the dinghy nudged against the stern of *Moondance*, he had seen the girl.

"Paul was with her?" asked Gabriel.

"Yes."

"Anyone else?"

"No, only Paul."

"She was conscious?"

"Barely."

"What was she wearing?"

"White dress, black hood over her head."

"You saw her face?"

"Never."

"Any injuries?"

"Her knees were bloody and she had scratches all over her arms. Bruises, too."

"Restraints?"

"Her hands."

"Front or back?"

"Back."

"What kind of restraints?"

"Flex-cuffs, very professional."

"Go on."

"Paul laid the girl on a couch in the main salon and gave her a shot of something to keep her quiet. Then he came up to the bridge and told me where he wanted me to go."

"Where was it?"

"The tidal creek just west of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. There's a small marina. I've used it before. It's an excellent spot. Paul had obviously done his homework."

Another glance at Keller. Another nod.

"Did you go straight across?"

"No," Lacroix answered. "That would have brought us ashore in broad daylight. We spent the entire day at sea. Then we went in around eleven that night."

"Paul kept the girl in the salon the entire time?"

"He took her to the head once, but otherwise ..."

"Otherwise what?"

"She got the needle."

"Ketamine?"

"I'm not a doctor."

"Really."

"You asked me a question, I gave you an answer."

"Did he take her ashore in the dinghy?"

"No. I went straight into the marina. It's the kind of place where you can park a car right next to your slip. Paul had one waiting. A black Mercedes."

"What kind of Mercedes?"

"E-Class."

"Registration?"

"French."

"Unoccupied?"

"No. There were two men. One was leaning against the hood as we came in. The other one was behind the wheel."

"Did you know the one leaning against the hood?"

“I’d never seen him before.”

“But that wasn’t true of the one behind the wheel, was it, Marcel?”

“No,” Lacroix answered. “The one behind the wheel was René Brossard.”

René Brossard was a foot soldier in an up-and-coming Marseilles crime family with international connections. He specialized in muscle work—debt collection, enforcement, security. In his spare time, he worked as a bouncer in a nightclub near the Old Port, mainly because he liked the girls who came there. Lacroix knew him from the neighborhood. He also knew his phone number.

“When did you call him?” asked Gabriel.

“A few days after I read the first story in the newspaper about the English girl who vanished while on holiday in Corsica. I put two and two together and realized she was the girl I’d dropped at the marina in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.”

“You’re something of a math genius?”

“I can add,” Lacroix quipped.

“You realized that Paul stood to get a lot of ransom money from someone, and you wanted a piece of the action.”

“He misled me about the kind of job it was,” said Lacroix. “I would have never agreed to take part in a high-profile kidnapping for a mere fifty thousand.”

“How much were you after?”

“I try not to make a habit of negotiating with myself.”

“Wise man,” said Gabriel. Then he asked Lacroix how long Brossard waited to return his call.

“Two days.”

“How much detail did you go into on the phone?”

“Enough to make it clear what I was after. Brossard called me back a few hours later and told me to come to Bar du Haut the next afternoon at four.”

“That was a very foolish thing to do, Marcel.”

“Why?”

“Because Paul might have been there instead of Brossard. And he might have put a bullet between your eyes for having the temerity to ask for more money.”

“I can look after myself.”

“If that were true,” said Gabriel, “you wouldn’t be taped to a chair on your own boat. But you were telling me about your conversation with René Brossard.”

“He told me Paul wanted to be reasonable. After that, we entered into a period of negotiations.”

“Negotiations?”

“Over the price of my settlement. Paul made an offer, I made a counteroffer. We went back and forth several times.”

“All by phone?”

Lacroix nodded.

“What’s Brossard’s role in the operation?”

“He’s staying in the house where they’re keeping the girl.”

“Is Paul there with him?”

“I never asked.”

“How many others are there?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that another woman is also staying there so they look like a family.”

“Has Brossard ever mentioned the English girl?”

“He said she’s alive.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“What’s the current state of your negotiations with Paul and Brossard?”

“We reached an agreement this morning.”

“How much were you able to chisel out of them?”

“Another hundred thousand.”

“When are you supposed to take delivery of the money?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Where?”

“Aix.”

“Where in Aix?”

“A café near the Place du General de Gaulle.”

“What’s the place called?”

“Le Provence—what else?”

“How’s it supposed to go down?”

“Brossard is supposed to arrive first, at ten minutes past five. I’m supposed to join him at twenty past.”

“Where will he be sitting?”

“At a table outside.”

“And the money?”

“Brossard told me it would be in a metal attaché case.”

“How inconspicuous.”

“It was his choice, not mine.”

“Is there a fallback if either one of you fails to show?”

“Le Cézanne, just up the street.”

“How long will he wait there?”

“Ten minutes.”

“And if you don’t show?”

“The deal’s off.”

“Were there any other instructions?”

“No more phone calls,” said Lacroix. “Paul’s getting nervous about all the phone calls.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Gabriel looked up toward the flying bridge, but this time Keller was standing stock-still, a black figure against a black sky, a gun balanced in outstretched hands. The single shot, muted by a suppressor, opened a hole above Lacroix’s left eye. Gabriel held the Frenchman’s shoulders as he died. Then he spun around in a rage and leveled his own weapon at Keller.

“You’d better put that away before someone gets hurt,” the Englishman said calmly.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“He got on my bad side. Besides,” Keller added as he slipped his gun into the waistband of his trousers, “we didn’t need him anymore.”

13

CÔTE D'AZUR, FRANCE

THEY SENT HIM to the bottom in the deep waters beyond the Golfe du Lion and then made for Marseilles. It was still dark when they drew into the Old Port; they slipped from *Moondance* a few minutes apart, climbed into their separate cars, and set out along the coast toward Toulon. Just before the town of Bandol, Gabriel pulled to the side of the road and loosened several engine cables. Then he telephoned the rental company and in the hysterical voice of Herr Klemp left a message saying where the “broken” car could be found. After wiping his fingerprints from the steering wheel and dashboard panel, he climbed into Keller’s Renault and together they drove eastward into the rising sun to Nice. On the rue Verdi was an old apartment building, white as bone, where the Office kept one of its many French safe flats. Gabriel entered the building alone and remained inside long enough to retrieve the post, which included the copy of Madeline Hart’s Party personnel file he had requested from Graham Seymour. He read it as Keller drove toward Aix along the A8 Autoroute.

“What does it say?” the Englishman asked after several minutes of silence.

“It says that Madeline Hart is perfect. But then we already knew that.”

“I was perfect once, too. And look how I turned out.”

“You were always a reprobate, Keller. You just didn’t realize it until that night in Iraq.”

“I lost eight of my comrades trying to protect your country from Saddam’s Scuds,” Keller said.

“And we are forever in your debt.”

Mollified, Keller switched on the radio and tuned it to an English-language station based in Monaco that served the large British expatriate community living in the south of France.

“Homesick?” asked Gabriel.

“Occasionally, I like to hear the sound of my native language.”

“You’ve never been back?”

“To England?”

Gabriel nodded.

“Never,” answered Keller. “I refuse to work there, and I’ve never accepted a contract on a British subject.”

“How noble of you.”

“One has to operate by a certain code.”

“So your parents have no idea you’re alive?”

“They haven’t a clue.”

“Then you couldn’t possibly be Jewish,” admonished Gabriel. “No Jewish boy would ever allow his mother to think he was dead. He wouldn’t dare.”

Gabriel turned to the most recent entry in Madeline Hart’s personnel file and read it silently as Keller drove. It was a copy of a letter, sent by Jeremy Fallon to the Party chairman, suggesting that Madeline be promoted to a junior post in a ministry and groomed for elected office. Then he looked at the snapshot of Madeline sitting at an outdoor café with the man they knew only as Paul.

Keller, watching him, asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m just wondering why a rising young star in Britain’s governing party was sharing a bottle of champagne with a first-rate creep like our friend Paul.”

“Because he knew she was having an affair with the British prime minister. And he was preparing to kidnap her.”

“How could he have known?”

“I have a theory.”

“Is it supported by fact?”

“A couple.”

“Then it’s only a theory.”

“But at least it will help to pass the time.”

Gabriel closed the file, as if to say he was listening. Keller switched off the radio.

“Men like Jonathan Lancaster always make the same mistake when they have an affair,” he said. “They trust their bodyguards to keep their mouths shut. But they don’t. They talk to each other, they talk to their wives, they talk to their girlfriends, and they talk to their old mates who’ve found work in London’s private security industry. And before long the talk reaches the ears of someone like Paul.”

“You think Paul is connected to the London security business?”

“He could be. Or he could know someone who is. However it happened,” Keller added, “a piece of information like that is gold to someone like Paul. He probably put Madeline under watch in London and hacked into her mobile phone and e-mail accounts. That’s how he found out she was coming to Corsica on holiday. And when she arrived, Paul was waiting.”

“Why have lunch with her? Why take the risk of showing his face?”

“Because he needed to get her alone so he could get her cleanly.”

“He seduced her?”

“He’s a charming bastard.”

“I don’t buy it,” said Gabriel after a moment of reflection.

“Why not?”

“Because at the time of her abduction, Madeline was romantically involved with the British prime minister. She wouldn’t have been attracted to someone like Paul.”

“Madeline was the prime minister’s mistress,” Keller countered, “which means there was very little romance in their relationship. She was probably a lonely girl.”

Gabriel looked at the photo again—not at Madeline but at Paul. “Who the hell is he?”

“He’s no amateur, that’s for sure. Only a professional would know about the don. And only a professional would dare to knock on the don’s door to ask for help.”

“If he’s such a professional, why did he have to rely on local talent to pull off the job?”

“You’re asking why he doesn’t have a crew of his own?”

“I suppose I am.”

“Simple economics,” Keller responded. “Maintaining a crew can be a complicated undertaking. And invariably there are personnel problems. When work is slow, the boys get unhappy. And when there’s a big score, the boys want a big cut.”

“So he uses freelancers on straight fee-for-service contracts to avoid having to share the profits.”

“In today’s competitive global business environment, everyone’s doing it.”

“Not the don.”

“The don is different. We’re a family, a clan. And you’re right about one thing,” Keller added. “Marcel Lacroix is lucky Paul didn’t have him killed. If he’d dared to ask Don Orsati for more money after completing a job, he would have ended up on the bottom of the Mediterranean in a cement coffin.”

“Which is where he is now.”

“Absent the cement, of course.”

Gabriel glared at Keller in disapproval but said nothing.

“You’re the one who ripped his earring out.”

“A torn earlobe is a temporary affliction. A bullet through the eye is forever.”

“What were we supposed to do with him?”

“We could have run him over to Corsica and left him with the don.”

“Trust me, Gabriel—he wouldn’t have lasted long. Orsati doesn’t like problems.”

“And, as Stalin liked to say, death solves all problems.”

“No man, no problem,” said Keller, finishing the quotation.

“But what if the man was lying to us?”

“The man had no reason to lie.”

“Why?”

“Because he knew he was never going to leave that boat alive.” Keller lowered his voice and added, “He was just hoping we would give him a painless death instead of letting him drown.”

“Is this another one of your theories?”

“Marseilles rules,” replied Keller. “When things start out violently down here, they always end violently.”

“And what if René Brossard isn’t sitting at Le Provence at five ten with a metal attaché case at his feet? What then?”

“He’ll be there.”

Gabriel wished he could share Keller’s confidence, but experience wouldn’t allow it. He checked his wristwatch and calculated the time they had left to find her.

“If Brossard does happen to show,” he said, “it might be better if we don’t kill him before he can lead us to the house where they’re hiding Madeline.”

“And then?”

Death solves all problems, thought Gabriel. No man, no problem.

14

AIX-EN-PROVENCE, FRANCE

THE ANCIENT CITY of Aix-En-Provence, founded by Romans, conquered by Visigoths, and adorned by kings, had little in common with Marseilles, its gritty neighbor to the south. Marseilles had drugs, crime, and an Arab quarter where little French was spoken; Aix had museums, shopping, and one of the country's finest universities. The Aixois tended to look down their noses at Marseilles. They ventured there rarely, mainly to use the airport, then fled as quickly as possible, hopefully while still in possession of their valuables.

Aix's main thoroughfare was the Cours Mirabeau, a long, broad boulevard lined with cafés and shaded by two parallel rows of leafy plane trees. Just to the north was a tangle of narrow streets and tiny squares known as the Quartier Ancien. It was mainly a pedestrian quarter, with all but the largest streets closed to motor traffic. Gabriel performed a series of time-tested Office maneuvers to see whether he was being followed. Then, after determining he was alone, he made his way to a busy little square along the rue Espariat. In the center of the square was an ancient column topped by a Roman capital; and on the southeastern corner, partially obscured by a large tree, was Le Provence. There were a few tables on the square and more along the rue Espariat, where two old men sat staring into space, a bottle of pastis between them. It was a place for locals more than tourists, thought Gabriel. A place where a man like René Brossard would feel comfortable.

Entering, Gabriel went to the *tabac* counter and asked for a pack of Gauloises and a copy of *Nice-Matin*; and while waiting for his change, he surveyed the interior to make certain there was only one way in and out. Then he went outside to select a fixed observation post that would allow him to see the tables on both sides of the restaurant's exterior. As he was weighing his options, a pair of Japanese teenagers approached and in dreadful French asked if he would take their picture. Gabriel pretended not to understand. Then he turned and walked along the rue Espariat, past the blank stares of the two old Provençal men, to the Place du General de Gaulle.

The roar of the cars racing around the busy traffic circle was jarring after the pedestrian quiet of the Quartier Ancien. It was possible Brossard would leave Aix by another route, but Gabriel doubted it; a car could get no closer to Le Provence than the Place du General de Gaulle. It would happen quickly, he thought, and if they weren't prepared, they would lose him. He peered down the cours Mirabeau, at the leaves of the plane trees fluttering in the faint breeze, and calculated the number of operatives and vehicles it would take to do the job correctly. Twelve at least, with four vehicles to avoid detection during the pursuit to the isolated property where they were holding the girl. Shaking his head slowly, he walked over to a café at the edge of the traffic circle where Keller sat drinking coffee alone.

"Well?" asked the Englishman.

"We need a motorbike."

"Where's the money you took from Lacroix before I killed him?"

Frowning, Gabriel patted his midsection. Keller left a few euros on the table and rose to his feet.

There was a dealership not far away, on the boulevard de la République. After spending a few minutes scrutinizing the inventory, Gabriel selected a Peugeot Satelis 500 premium scooter, which Keller paid for in cash and registered under one of his false Corsican-based identities. While the clerk saw to the paperwork, Gabriel crossed the street to a men's clothing store where he purchased a leather jacket, black jeans, and a pair of leather boots. He changed in one of the shop's dressing rooms and put his old clothing in the storage compartment of the scooter. Then, after slipping on

a black helmet, he climbed on board the bike and followed Keller down the boulevard to the Place du General de Gaulle.

By then, it was approaching five o'clock. Gabriel left the bike at the base of the rue Espariat and, with the helmet beneath his arm, made his way up the narrow street to the tiny square with a Roman column at the center. The two old men had yet to move from their table at Le Provence. Gabriel took a table at an Irish pub on the opposite side of the street and ordered a lager from the waitress; and for a moment he wondered why anyone would come to an Irish pub in the south of France. His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a powerfully built man coming up the street through the shadows, a metal attaché case dangling from his right hand. The man entered the interior portion of Le Provence and emerged a moment later with a café crème and a shot of something stronger. His eyes swept slowly over the square as he sat down at an empty table, settling briefly on Gabriel before moving on. Gabriel looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past five exactly. He removed his mobile phone from his coat pocket and speed-dialed Keller.

"I told you he'd come," said the Englishman.

"How did he arrive?"

"Black Mercedes."

"What kind?"

"E-Class."

"Registration?"

"Guess."

"Same car that was waiting at the marina?"

"We'll know soon enough."

"Who was driving?"

"A woman, mid-twenties, maybe early thirties."

"French?"

"Could be. I'll ask her, if you'd like."

"Where is she now?"

"Driving in circles."

"Where are you?"

"Two cars behind her."

Gabriel severed the connection and slipped the phone back into his coat pocket. Then, from the other pocket, he removed one of the phones he had taken from Marcel Lacroix's boat. It would happen quickly, he thought again, and if they weren't prepared they would lose him. Twelve operatives, four vehicles—that's what he needed to do the job properly. Instead, he had only two vehicles, and the only other member of his team was a professional hit man who had once tried to kill him. He drank some of the lager, if only for the sake of his cover. Then he stared at the dead man's phone and watched the minutes tick slowly past.

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