

A GOOD PATRIOT

CHAPTER ONE

Nathan Montserrat pushed through the revolving glass door into the lobby of the dowager Beirut Orient Hotel thirty minutes early for his luncheon. Chords of oud and *darabukka* music wafted from ceiling speakers. He chose a seat in the Byblos Lounge with a clear line of vision into the reception area. He scanned the space for Lebanese gendarmerie, while Saudi sheiks in black *bisht*, Jordanian princes in tasseled *keffiyeh*, and Algerian Berbers in hooded burnoose like inscrutable *djinn* paraded across the marble floor.

Outside the hotel, traffic snarled on the Corniche like webs of Lebanese deceit. Between the Saint-George Yachting Club and the ravaged Holiday Inn, a crater from an assassination attempt pitted the Ain el MreIsseh. Beyond the pocked seawall, fishing boats and sleek yachts plied the azure waters of the eastern Mediterranean Sea while, precisely at noon, the muezzin called the faithful to prayer.

The only part of Beirut that Montserrat enjoyed was leaving it, but he followed his marching orders like a well-disciplined deep cover operative of the Central Intelligence Agency. Valued for his linguistic skills, he adapted to his environment with the ease of a chameleon. In the city of pashas and effendis, he wore the manners of the rich and powerful like a haughty skin.

With a limp wave of his hand, he beckoned a waiter. “*Qahwa Arabiyya.*”

At a table for two in the corner of the lounge, a solitary woman sipped a Sidecar with a twist of lemon. She wore a taupe spread collar shirtdress of Parisian couture. Her

chestnut hair, piled in a beehive, matched her eyes. The bracelets on her wrists swayed as she tapped her cell phone with a crimson-tipped finger. Raising the device with her left hand, she released two buttons of the shirtdress with her right hand. She graced Montserrat with a brilliant smile as she traced her cleavage with her fingers, then wiggled them in encouragement.

In Beirut, hookers were as common as hummus and as appealing as homework assignments. Montserrat placed his hand over his heart in chaste greeting. She was inarguably beautiful, but aside from the dangers inherent to paid sex, he only wanted to finish the assignment and return to Abby, his Agency colleague.

A decade prior, the Agency had dispatched Montserrat to Beirut on an in-and-out mission. His target had been another well-dressed woman of indeterminate age, who proposed the second oldest Levantine exchange, money for secrets. The country's bloody civil war had faded into an unpleasant memory, and the resuscitated heart of the city had beat like a frenetic *dabka*. Beirut was a phoenix of *plus ça change*.

Only the players changed. Especially the terrorists. Compared to the latest crop of jihadists, the quixotic dreams of the earlier fanatics to replace governments and reclaim ancestral lands seemed quaint. The current terrorists sought genocidal weapons.

The waiter, an elderly man bearded with luxuriant muttonchops, returned with a lidded pewter cup of the cardamom spiced coffee. He wore a silk Ottoman kaftan and billowing *salvar* trousers threaded with silver filigree. He spoke French, Lebanon's second tongue. "*Monsieur.*"

The deep cover operative dismissed him in the same language. "*Merci.*"

Beneath his Beirut affectations, Montserrat radiated an Iowan respectability. An inch over six feet, he carried two hundred pounds of muscle. He possessed a mop of unruly brown hair, and his brown eyes were crisp with energy. He wore a grey suit with chalk stripes, a white cotton shirt fastened with twenty-four carat gold cufflinks, a regimental silk tie, and black loafers. Beneath his jacket, a leather holster held a nine millimeter Beretta M9.

He had met his luncheon companion, André Simenon, twice previously. Once during a dinner at Hôtel Matignon in Paris, the official residence of the prime minister, and again, three days prior, at the concert of a mezzo soprano in the Salon de la Musique of Qasr es-Sanawbar, the Beirut residence of the French ambassador. The dinner initiated the recruitment. The concert baited the trap. The luncheon would snare the sixty-two-year-old Parisian with the carrot of wealth or the stick of Guantanamo Bay.

Simenon, the COO of a French nuclear power consortium with extensive interests throughout the Middle East, possessed a fondness for very young and very beautiful Lebanese girls. To support his harem, he worked a lucrative sideline selling black market yellowcake to some of the region's more aggressive jihadists for use in dirty bombs. The extent of his information made him a worthy mark, while his greed and predilections created a prime target for blackmail, the deep cover operative's preferred motivational tool. While the allure of bribery faded over time, the appeal of extortion endured forever.

Across the lounge, the solitary woman ordered a second Sidecar. She pointed her crimson-tipped finger toward the empty chair and again graced Montserrat with her brilliant smile, an invitation for the oldest Levantine exchange, money for sex.

His secure Blackberry vibrated. He glanced at the encoded number. With regret, he pressed the green button and spoke French. His boss understood only menu Arabic.

“*Oui, mon ami. Ça va?*”

Felix Salamanca, ten years older than Montserrat, five inches shorter, fifty pounds lighter, and five hundred percent more Machiavellian, disdained niceties.

“Are you with Simenon?”

“Not yet, Felix. Another few minutes, if he’s on time.”

In Langley, six thousand miles to the west, Salamanca issued orders. “Forget the Frenchman.”

Montserrat braced for an aria of lies. He wanted to end the conversation before it began. Instead, he placed 10,000 Lebanese *lira* beneath the pewter cup and exited the lounge, the Blackberry pressed hard against his ear. “I’ve got the pitch. He agrees, or I squeeze his balls.”

“The mission’s scrubbed. You’re reassigned to a new target.”

Nothing would change his boss’s mercurial decision. “What do you need from me?”

“You must understand the vital importance of your new mission, old buddy. You pull this off, garlands and medals will attend your return to Langley. A veritable triumph at the gates! Not to mention a promotion and a raise.”

Montserrat entered a passageway between a Cuban cigar store and a Swiss furrier. He watched the elevator banks. “Promises, always promises.”

“Your target arrived in Beirut from Damascus early this morning and checked into the hotel’s Ambassador Suite. He likes to pamper himself with Michelin restaurants and Scandinavian escorts when he travels outside Syria.”

“What’s his name?”

“Abdullah al-Hanoud. He’s the Palestinian Liberation Jihad’s number two man. Your assignment is to exfiltrate him to Larnaca. I’ll send you a photo.”

Montserrat knew the terrorist organization by its Arabic title, *Harakat al-Jihad al-Tahrir al-Filastini*, and he knew of al-Hanoud, one of the most savage terrorists in the Middle East. “Maybe afterwards I can walk into Baabda Palace and kidnap the president of Lebanon.”

“Listen carefully, old buddy. Your new best friend left Balata in the West Bank, the most notorious terrorist incubator outside Iraq, to become the number one bomb maker in the Middle East. He’s responsible for ambushes against our military and attacks on our diplomatic missions. I want him in a three by five cell wearing Gitmo orange.”

Montserrat lodged his objection. “I’ll drop Simenon, but going after al-Hanoud is suicide. I’m on the next flight to Dulles.”

“No, old buddy, you’re on a fast boat from the port in Jounieh to the Cypriot harbor. I’ve made the arrangements.”

Returning to Langley would end badly for Montserrat, but he would still possess his wits and limbs, while to remain in the good graces of Salamanca, he would face an extremely dangerous terrorist in a hostile city with neither support nor a plan. “I’m acting in self-preservation.”

“You’re acting obtuse.”

Montserrat watched Simenon step out of an elevator with two exquisite young women, one on each arm. He kissed each in Continental fashion, as if he were a chaste uncle. The only protection he carried was his Parisian snobbery. “Al-Hanoud is now number one on your most wanted list, while you can buy a horny Frenchman with yellowcake any time?”

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

Montserrat acknowledged the inevitable, a familiar capitulation with his boss. “I’ll snatch him. Send me his picture. I want seventy-two hours to prepare. Five days is better. I need intel and a strategy. A support team would help.”

“I wish I could agree, I really do, but you don’t have that much time. Besides, you already have a plan. Walk into his room, introduce yourself, and drag him to Larnaca.”

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

“Glory to the gladiator, old buddy. Just bring me al-Hanoud with his head attached to his shoulders.”