

Searching for Ami

By John O'Keefe

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For Yvonne, Amelia and Ivan

About the author

John O'Keefe is a doctor working as a general practitioner in Dublin.

He is married to Yvonne – they have two children.

This is his first novel.

‘Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if
you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.’

Friedrich Nietzsche

‘After the first death there is no other.’

Dylan Thomas

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Prologue

Switzerland

Harry Katz moved to the balcony to take the call. Far below, drifting into sight through scattered wisps of valley mist, a small alpine village awakened. Tendrils of white smoke rose from chimneys silhouetted in the weak dawn sun. He looked at the screen of his iPhone. It registered 972 2 – familiar Israel and Jerusalem prefixes – followed by a landline number. He pressed the active button.

‘With you in a second,’ he muttered in German. He laid the phone on the white marble parapet, damp with dew, and beside it placed a delicate blue china cup with its matching saucer, half filled with his strong coffee. He glanced down at the view: the old wooden houses of the village, surrounded by green pastures and darker woods. Restless spirits live in those trees, an old man had told him and Uri in the hotel bar last night. Uri had laughed and walked away, but Harry had listened.

He picked up the mobile.

‘Sorry for keeping you,’ he said.

‘It’s Eshan. Don’t cut me off – you’ll regret it.’ A harsh authoritative voice, speaking in Hebrew.

Harry’s body stiffened as his mind raced. Eshan Bercovic! How had he found this number? Could Eshan even know he was in Switzerland?

‘What do you want?’

‘Can’t talk over a cellphone, it’s not secure. It’s about your daughter Ami. Call me from a landline – you should have my number there.’

‘It’s here.’ He held the phone away. Every instinct shrieked at him to press the ‘end call’ button, to dispatch Eshan Bercovic back into cyberspace, but three words overcame. “Your daughter Ami”. He decided. ‘Okay. Give me ten minutes.’

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Harry clutched the parapet to steady himself, as a cold sweat appeared first on his brow then on his back. He shivered, shook his head and turned around. A faint haze had crept across the hotel veranda, and the guests taking breakfast outside were rising from their tables, moving inside to the warmth. Uri remained, sitting quietly at his table, a flicker of concern crossing his face as he stared across. Harry put the phone back into his pocket as he moved over to his boss.

‘What’s up?’ asked Uri.

‘That was Eshan Bercovic.’

‘Bercovic!’ Uri’s placid face contorted. ‘Hope you told him to go fuck himself.’

‘No, I have to call him back.’

Harry turned away without waiting for a reply. Hurrying along the corridors towards his room, questions raced through his mind. What was happening? Why had Eshan called him now? What did this phone call mean? Were all the nightmares from his past about to engulf him again?

Part One

Tiberias, Israel

September 1997

1

Ami careered into Harry, screaming with delight at seeing her father. He managed to drop the flowers he was carrying onto a table and kick the apartment door shut before lifting his excited daughter. Sixteen months old and a bundle of energy, Ami's masses of blond curls were tied with small yellow ribbons and she wore a dress of the same colour. Her hair smelt of fresh shampoo. She had a green glass-beaded necklace, the same colour as her eyes, looped around her neck. Laughing loudly, she rattled her jewellery in his face before demanding to be put back on the floor, from where she dragged Harry into the kitchen by his trouser leg as he picked up the flowers.

Rachel stood beside the window, iron in hand, a jumbled pile of clothes in a basket at her feet. Barefoot and wearing a loose white T-shirt and black leggings, his wife looked tired. As always, she had music playing, a soft piano piece Harry thought he recognised. Her initial smile of greeting altered to one of mild surprise as she looked at the white lilies and yellow roses in Harry's arms. She turned down the CD player and stood expectantly, waiting for Harry to speak.

'That French guy, Eric Satie?' asked Harry. 'Right?'

'Don't be a smart ass. What's with those flowers?'

'Three years to the day,' he smiled, 'anniversary time. Sorry I'm so late home.'

Rachel's face lit with pleasure. She took the flowers and laid them beside the sink, pushing aside some of the clutter to make room. Putting her arms around her husband's waist she lifted herself up onto her toes to kiss him on the lips.

'Jeez, I totally forgot. Okay, full marks.'

Harry was about to reply but was interrupted by Ami, who tugged at his leg then ran over and clambered onto a chair beside the dining table. Among the

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scattered toys was her special candle, which Harry always lit when he came home in the evening. Babbling excitedly, Ami pointed. Harry reluctantly disengaged from Rachel, gave her another quick kiss, walked over and lit the stump. Rachel picked up two vases and began to arrange the flowers, loudly singing while Harry chased Ami around the apartment. Her New York accent sounded even more pronounced whenever she sang.

‘Choose them yourself, did you?’ Rachel kidded as she smelt a rose, smiling broadly as she turned towards her husband.

‘Well, the florist did help,’ admitted Harry with a sheepish grin, but there was no need to tell his wife that deciding on flowers had been the least of his problems. His unit had been alerted about a suicide bomber in Nazareth. The youth had been identified and disarmed, but at the moment of his arrest he had glanced at a teenage girl standing nearby. One of Harry’s colleagues made the immediate decision to approach her, and as she had ignored his strident commands to keep her hands raised high, instead reaching inside her tunic, he had shot her twice in the head. She had died instantly, and a major disturbance had been averted when the officers opened her tunic to reveal multiple sticks of explosive strapped to her chest. It was nearly five o’clock before Harry could leave, and he had arrived at their local shopping centre in Tiberias just after its closing time. The security guard at the mall entrance had wanted to search the car, but Harry had intimidated him with his ID and been allowed through. Luckily the florist, an American compatriot of Rachel’s, had waited for him.

‘Can you mind Ami?’ Rachel called over to Harry. ‘I need a shower and I’m running late.’

‘Still going?’

‘I promised them I would.’ A hint of regret in her voice, then a change of expression. ‘No, it’s our anniversary. I’ll call and make an excuse.’

‘Thanks,’ Harry stood up, walked over and gave her a hug, ‘but no. Go on, you need to get out.’

As Rachel had so often remarked, the “moms club” had been the saving of her sanity. A chance meeting in a supermarket with a young Irish woman, who had a baby the same age as Ami, had introduced her into a group of English-speaking expatriate mothers. Two American, one Irish and one British, they had become firm friends. In addition to the frequent meetings with their children they now got together one evening a month without family or husbands.

'Where tonight?' asked Harry.

'Margaret's house, so it'll probably be a bit boozy. I'll walk there and get a taxi home.'

'Okay, but don't stay too long. I've an early start tomorrow.'

Harry grinned, knowing full well Rachel would be late.

'C'mon Harry, I'm always first to leave.'

'Yeah, sure. Not want me to drive you over?'

'No, I can do with the walk, and Ami hasn't seen ya all day.'

As Rachel was leaving the room she turned around, her smile fading and a look of concern appearing.

'Did I hear something on the radio about a bomb in Nazareth?' A statement, not a question, its meaning all too clear to Harry. Yes, Rachel and he loved each other unconditionally. Yes, his wife was happy in their new apartment, felt secure in Tiberias, and had begun to learn Hebrew. However, she worried about her husband's safety and the effects were beginning to show. She knew only too well the nature of Harry's work. Although Rachel repeatedly insisted Israel and not New York was her home, he knew, he just knew this was coming to an end. It was asking too much of her, and if their relationship was to progress they would have to move to the States.

'It was all under control,' said Harry. 'Stop worrying, Nazareth is totally safe.'

'Okay, then.' A pregnant pause between the two words.

Harry had no chance to respond as his daughter demanded his attention by wrapping herself around his leg and bouncing up and down noisily. They moved to the play corner and Harry lowered himself onto the ground to commence her current favourite game – watching her father assemble a pile of coloured bricks before she careered into them with a loud shriek. Time passed. He was barely aware of Rachel getting ready to leave until she came over and kissed them both goodbye. She looked lovely. She had tied her hair with a black velvet ribbon, making her appear much younger than her twenty-five years. Her makeup seemed different. It reminded him of when he first knew her – dark eye shadow and a dusky red, almost gothic lipstick which emphasised the clustered brown freckles on her nose and cheeks. She wore a short maroon dress and flat shoes of the same colour.

'Don't get up,' said Rachel. 'Thanks for the flowers, and sorry about tonight. I'll make it up to you later.'

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‘That a promise?’

‘For sure. There’s a pizza in the freezer,’ added Rachel as she moved towards the door. ‘You should be able to manage fish fingers and rice for Ami.’

‘Thanks.’ Harry had married his wife for many reasons, but her cooking was not one of them.

Ami awoke her father just before dawn. They were assembling a large blue hippopotamus on the living room table when Rachel stumbled past, muttering that she needed a Tylenol. Returning from the bathroom she moved behind Harry, twined her arms around his neck and leaned her head on his shoulder.

‘Couldn’t wait up for me, could you, lover boy?’ she chuckled as she flicked her tongue along his earlobe. ‘I heard you snoring from the corridor.’

‘Should have woken me,’ Harry replied, reaching backwards and stroking her thigh. She purred in response, and then lightly cuffed him on the shoulder. ‘Double the fun tonight then.’

Rachel moved around to the other side of the table and picked up Ami, who had her arms outstretched in anticipation. While cuddling her daughter she looked towards Harry.

‘Did you remember about today?’

‘Today?’

‘I need your jeep to visit Beth.’

‘Shit,’ Harry grimaced, ‘I’d forgotten all about it.’

He stood up and walked to the door.

‘Take it then. I’m not going to argue,’ he called from the bathroom.

Having shaved and dressed in silence, he came back to the living room. He gave Ami a warm hug and Rachel a token peck on the cheek before slamming the apartment door behind him. Moments later he returned in a worse humour, as he realised he had taken the wrong car keys.

Outside the air was oppressively warm, humid and calm – unusual weather for early September. To the east, above Lake Galilee and the distant Golan Heights, the dawn sky was a vivid and angry red, reflecting on the lake below like a stain of blood. To the west the heavens merged into darkness, the hills of Lower Galilee huddling under the shadows of the towering clouds. Distant flashes split this gloom, lighting up an otherwise invisible horizon. He heard a faint roll of thunder.

In his wife's small Peugeot Harry drove towards the gathering storm. Half way to Nazareth he had to slow to a crawl as four trundling flatbeds – each silhouetted with the outline of a Merkava main battle tank – pulled onto the road in grey clouds of dust, giving him no option but to follow. Now with time to think he forced himself to breath slowly and deeply. To calm down and rationalise why he became so angry and upset whenever Rachel visited her sister.

Beth was always welcome at their home in Tiberias – indeed Harry greatly enjoyed her company – but he strongly objected to his family going to visit her. His wife's twin lived in a Jewish settlement in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights of Syria. Harry liked Beth, but he considered her naïve to a fault. She could see no wrong in assisting in appropriating land “promised to the Jewish people”. In Harry's four years of working for the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, the degree of anger and frustration caused to Palestinian Arabs by the illegal Jewish settlements was a fundamental issue. He had to deal with its violent consequences on a daily basis.

The flatbeds turned away heading north, probably towards Lebanon. Harry's annoyance gave way to regret. In his three years with Rachel this was the only matter they ever seriously argued about, and he always felt terrible afterwards. He resolved to phone her as soon as he arrived at work, to apologise and make up.

His office was located in the shabbier part of Nazaret Illit, the Jewish section of Nazareth. Previously an Arab town, Nazareth was now one third Jewish, but both communities lived in very separate neighbourhoods. The building itself, an ageing nondescript concrete and glass slab, had no sign indicating its purpose but on its roof clustered a complex of communication aerials. Harry opened the gate with an infrared beam, grateful he had remembered to put a unit on the spare key ring. He parked, strolled across to the battered metal door and inserted his card, looking up at the surveillance camera to show his face. Inside he walked over to the lift but cursed when he saw the peeling note that it had still not been repaired. He kicked aside a cluster of empty cans, food cartons and cigarette packs. Maintenance and Cleaning had been on strike for over three weeks, and the effects showed.

He worked on the fourth floor, at the top of steep and echoing concrete stairs. As he opened the door into his department he noticed other sections were as busy as usual, with the sounds of voices, phones and electronic beeps. There

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were at least eight Uzis stacked in the communal rack, along with a couple of AKs. Everywhere smelt of stale cigarettes.

His own office was empty. A small room, it was crammed with four desks, green metal filing cabinets, Apple Macs and printers. Maps were taped to the walls, and balls of crumpled paper littered the floor. He went to the coffee percolator in the main office and poured a cup. Going back inside he sat at his desk beside the window, picked up his desk phone and called home, only to hear an engaged tone. Turning his chair around to the grimy window he gazed out over a familiar dreary urban landscape of jumbled grey roofs, washing lines and television aerials. An old woman hurriedly gathered in the white sheets on her washing line, looking anxiously upwards at the approaching gloom. Harry picked up a framed photograph from the windowsill. Spinning back to his desk he redialled, but his home phone was still in use. He smiled as he looked at the photograph.

The family Katz, taken by Beth on the evening of Ami's first birthday.

Harry was standing, holding Ami in one arm, his other over Rachel's shoulder. Rachel's head leaned gently against his chest. The picture presented an amalgam of contrasts. Harry was tall, over one eighty-two centimetres in height, thin and dark skinned with straight black hair just covering his ears, framing an eager, almost boyish face. Although an Ashkenazi, or European Israeli, he looked far more like a Sephardi, or Oriental. Ironically this almost Arab appearance, allied with his fluency in Arabic, had facilitated his participation in some of his organisation's more dangerous assignments. Next to him Rachel looked tiny. Over twenty centimetres smaller – "I'm five feet bloody nothing and I don't care what that is in centimetres" – she had long wavy brown hair and a face covered in freckles from the early summer sun. She too was slender, but physically strong to an extent that far belied her appearance. Ami, in contrast to her parents, possessed long blond curly hair that already reached nearly to her shoulders. In the photograph she was ignoring her aunt, insisting on being put on the ground where her teddy bear had fallen.

Harry put the photograph back and dialled again. He exhaled in relief as Rachel answered immediately.

'I'm sorry about this morning,' Harry began, but Rachel's simultaneous apology interrupted him. He could hear the happy sounds of Ami playing in the background. 'You know it's not you, it's just you going over there.'

'I'm sorry as well.' Rachel sounded upset. 'Hate arguing with you.'

'There's a storm coming. Don't go if it hits Tiberias.'

'No, I won't.'

'Okay.' Harry's mood rose. 'Drive carefully, and remember it gets dark about six-thirty.'

'I promise. Can you get supper ready for us?'

'Sure.' Harry noticed the office door opening, and then closing. 'Someone's coming, I'll have to go!'

'Wait a second; I'll hold the phone to Ami.'

Harry heard a clear 'Daddy' before a loud clunk as the phone fell, followed by a resounding laugh from Ami.

'Did you hear that?' Rachel exclaimed. 'She's never said that before.'

Harry grinned with delight. 'Give her a huge hug,' he said, 'and tell her she's the cleverest girl in the world.'

'Will do. See you later. Love you!'

'Love you.'

Hanging up the phone his mood altered as all his concerns resurfaced. Rationally he knew the Golan, now fully incorporated into Israel itself, was safe. He regretted he had ever told Rachel, as she used it to justify her going there. Knowing he worked for the Shin Bet she trusted he would tell her of any security fears. There were no current alarms, but he still worried.

Minutes later he looked up from his mail to see his colleague Eshan standing in front of him. Harry had long stopped wondering how Eshan managed to silently glide into any space. Slightly older and smaller than Harry, Eshan was thin and wiry, with close-cropped black hair. His dark eyes, almost sunken in a lined and weary face pitted with acne scars seemed rarely to blink, never to relax. Constantly scanning, when they fixed upon a person they did so with an intimidating intensity. He seldom smiled, and never made small talk. As usual he carried a weapon – a Glock semi-automatic in a shoulder holster – and a mobile phone in a loop on his belt.

He reached across, took and lit one of Harry's cigarettes. As Harry grunted a greeting he remarked Harry's car was missing. Before Harry had a chance to reply, Eshan picked up something from his own desk and left as quietly as he had come. Harry looked out the window at the continuing gloom.

He called Weather Ops in Haifa, but they predicted the storm would miss

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Tiberias and had already begun moving away. He considered driving home and taking back his jeep. Rachel could not get to the settlement in her small Peugeot, and he could always invent a terrorist scare. There would be the mother of all rows, but their marriage would survive.

He decided to check on the security situation in the Golan, walking down the corridor to Current Status. Surprisingly quiet, it had only one operative, a young blond woman whom Harry had never seen before. She looked up from her computer and beamed at Harry, only for any warmth in her smile to diminish as she noticed his badge.

‘Can I help you?’ Her voice was polite, formal.

‘Are you in charge here?’ Harry asked.

‘That’s me.’

‘I need security status for the Southern Golan.’

She reached for a small pile of faxes and leafed through them.

‘Nothing there. I’ll log on to Jerusalem.’

She fiddled with her computer, then sat back in her chair, took out an emery board and began filing her nails.

‘Takes a few minutes,’ she said. ‘Why do you want to know about the Golan anyway?’ The implication was clear. Harry’s section dealt with fraud in grimy industrial zones, not important or interesting theatres like the Lebanese border or the Golan.

‘Just do it!’ he snapped.

He moved to the window and looked outside in silence. It had become darker, but no rain had appeared. The cars on the street below needed their full beams.

‘That’s it,’ she said eventually. ‘No warnings for the Southern Golan, or anywhere at all in the Golan. It’s quiet there.’

Harry turned to leave, as she inspected her nails.

‘There’s a maximum alert for the Shebba area, but that’s not what you asked about,’ she called after him, a triumphant hint to her voice.

Harry kept walking, but his relief was tempered by annoyance. Still, he was reassured, and explained why those Merkavas were going north. There would be no need for a row with Rachel, but this would be the last time his wife and daughter would ever visit that settlement.

2

Harry picked up two coffees from the communal dispenser, booted his computer and had just begun tapping into it when Eshan returned. Without acknowledging the coffee, Eshan picked up the cup and sat at his desk. The men ignored each other, as they had been doing for most of the six months since Eshan had arrived. Their relationship had not progressed beyond colleagues forced to cooperate together. Little warmth or friendship existed, and barely any interest. Eshan seemed to have no emotional attachments. Harry had never heard any mention of a girlfriend, partner or family, but a colleague had once remarked Eshan had acquired a considerable reputation among the female staff of the organisation.

Eshan had bitterly resented being relocated from active service to an administrative department and had made little secret of this. Both Harry and he knew his stay would be temporary – he was too ambitious to remain in this provincial backwater, this dumping ground for disgraced or disabled Shin Bet agents. He had simply run out of luck, being implicated in a botched operation in Jordan which had attracted the full glare of hostile media attention. His fall from grace had been considered political, not institutional – the politicians had needed a scapegoat and he was sacrificed. Powerful patrons and admirers in the higher ranks of the Shin Bet were biding their time until the opportunity presented itself for his rehabilitation.

Eshan’s phone rang and Harry listened to a sycophantic conversation, peppered with intermittent use of “I appreciate that” and “thanks for your support”, and repeated use of the name “Amihai”. From the first day he had come to the office, Eshan had repeatedly reminded his colleagues of his close relationship with Amihai Ayalon, now Director General of the Shin Bet. In contrast, Harry had only met Ayalon once, an occasion burnt into his memory.

Harry had been called to headquarters in Jerusalem, under no illusions about the nature of the summons. When he submitted his detailed report of the atrocities he had witnessed in Khiam Prison in Lebanon he suspected his career would be threatened, and anticipated some degree of fallout. His meeting with

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the Director General, a large muscular man about fifty years of age with an unlined face framed with receding straight black hair, had been short. Even now Harry shuddered as he remembered how his boss had leaned back in his chair, smiling thinly.

‘Congratulations are in order for your report,’ Ayalon had said in a monotone. ‘I’ve recommended, no, ordered your promotion to major. As of now.’

Harry had waited in silence as Ayalon’s thin smile weakened.

‘I am transferring you from your present position,’ he continued. ‘You will be moving to admin in Nazareth, concentrating on fraud and espionage in our main industrial sectors. I wish you well there.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry had replied. He stood, ignored the offered handshake and walked out the door into professional exile. To the department of the pariahs. He did not care, did not hurt. His priorities had fundamentally altered. His family now mattered above all, and the relative lack of any physical danger in this new placement took on a welcome significance.

Mid afternoon: The storm had abated, and the sun shone brightly. As Harry stood up to stretch his legs his pager beeped. He saw a message to phone a number, which he recognized from the prefix to be in the Golan. His call was answered immediately.

‘Kibbutz Meitzar,’ spoke a familiar sounding voice.

‘Harry Katz. Someone paged me.’

‘Hiya Harry. It’s Rollie Herzog.’

Harry knew Rollie from their army days, but had not seen him for some years. A large and cheerful man, famous for his unending expletives, Rollie had been the goalkeeper in the battalion soccer team. Harry had always liked him.

‘Yeah, how’s it going Rollie? What you want me for?’

‘I’ve just driven back from those idiots up at the settlement. They wanted me to fix a motor, but turns out it’s yours.’ Rollie coughed and continued. ‘That piece of Yankee crap hit a hole and has a broken axle. I can fix it, but can’t get the parts till tomorrow. I told the assholes to get stuffed, but then find out the driver’s your wife!’

‘Are they all right?’ interrupted Harry.

‘Sure, sure, they’re cool. I can fix it easily. Says she and the kid are fine in

her sister's caravan. They'll be home by midday tomorrow.'

'You are absolutely definite?' Harry persisted, his voice rising.

'Stop worrying Harry!' Rollie laughed. 'They're only up there for the night. I'll radio up and tell them I spoke to you. Next time you're here why don't you visit? You know our kibbutz?'

'Sure. Okay.'

'Look, I have been here for years and nothing ever happens,' Rollie emphasised. 'Call me later if you want, since I can't phone you. Bloody spooks all have pagers. See you sometime.'

'Thanks Rollie! I owe you one.'

Harry paced around the office for a few moments, lost in thought. Why had he not gone with his instincts and driven home? He sat down, lit a cigarette and gave Eshan a brief account.

'Where's this settlement?' asked Eshan.

'Southern Golan, near a kibbutz called Meitzar.' Harry moved over to a large map on the wall and pointed with his cigarette.

'I didn't realise there were any settlements in that area,' Eshan said, walking over and looking for himself. 'There's nothing marked.'

'I'd never heard of it either until Beth moved there,' Harry said as he sat down. 'It's tiny, about ten adults and no kids. Mixture of Yanks and South Africans.'

'Security?'

'I've only been there once, but it seemed okay.' Harry gestured again to the map. 'It's right on the Syrian border, but that's quiet now.'

'So, you trust this guy's assessment?'

'Yeah, totally. Rollie could repair anything, so if he says he can fix the car he will.' Harry relaxed slightly. 'I just don't like Rachel and Ami being there at night.'

'Well, I'd planned to work late,' Eshan replied. 'Do you want to stay and help if you're doing nothing better?'

Harry sat silently, drumming the desk with his fingertips.

'Why don't you phone your wife if you're concerned?' Eshan injected.

'It's not so simple.' Harry looked up. 'There's no phone line to the settlement, and no mobile coverage. They radio to the kibbutz, and if Rachel needs to contact Beth she has to phone there. No, Rollie's right. I'll stay on here.'

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Later that afternoon, Eshan brought a sheet of paper over to Harry's desk.

'Saw a fax you may be interested in. It's a satellite report about something going on at the Syrian border in the Golan. I'll call army headquarters in Tel Aviv and see what it's about.'

Harry scanned the fax, which was a bulletin from the Intelligence section of the IDF – the Israeli Army.

'Thanks.'

Harry listened as Eshan chased up the report, eventually finding the person who had sent out the faxed communication, discussing and questioning it.

'What's that all about?' he asked as Eshan hung up.

'They got images at the end of the visual window,' Eshan gestured towards the map. 'Some activity at the border. There shouldn't be anybody there, but Tel Aviv seems unconcerned. They've only given their Grade Five – that's the fax and no alert to the IDF or local militia.'

'Where exactly is it?' asked Harry, as he moved towards the map on the wall.

'About twelve K north of your settlement,' Eshan replied, 'near a kibbutz called Ramat Magshim. Can you see it?'

'Yeah. It's right on the border, but looks like more like fifteen K away from the settlement. Nothing in between, just scrubland.'

'So it would take them a week to get there,' Eshan shrugged in dismissal. 'Sorry I troubled you!'

But Harry was worried. A pain had appeared in his stomach and a sweat on his brow. Something rankled, but he couldn't put a finger on it. He lit another cigarette and paced around, then turned to Eshan.

'No, it's not enough,' he said. 'Bear with me. Something's wrong, but I don't know what. Let's get these images here. How long does it take?'

Eshan called Tel Aviv.

'Few minutes. They're sending them to Current Status.'

The same officer was still on duty. She had been about to leave, but reluctantly agreed to reboot her computer and check for their information.

There were three pictures, all with different detail. The first hazy satellite image showed a group of four men standing close together, their faces hidden by peaked caps. They appeared to be young, casually dressed in T-shirts and jeans. The second, focused back, showed the same four men, now smaller, with

the border fence and its protective sand strip visible beside them. An attached message indicated the strip and the fence looked undisturbed. The last image showed the group, now as dots in a barren landscape of rocks and scanty scrub. The line of the fence and sand strip could be still made out, but Harry noticed what appeared to be a white taxi on a dirt road nearby. Another message said the men were standing approximately three hundred metres from the car. Each screen had been imprinted with the time of the image.

'They drove up in a taxi!' Harry exclaimed. 'All right, let's analyse. Hats on – I don't like it. Four of them – that's a bad number. So, what are they up to? No weapons, but there could be anything under those bushes. Do they know we're watching them?'

The duty officer moved behind them to view the screen, placing her hand on Eshan's shoulder and leaning her elbow across his upper back. Harry smelt a faint perfume, a musky tea scent.

'We always assume they know our satellite times,' she interrupted, 'but they repositioned this one yesterday and it makes its last sweep seven minutes later. Maybe they didn't know.'

'No, I don't buy it,' Eshan said. 'The Syrians always keep their guys in touch. Two possibilities. One is they are clean – surveyors or something, especially with that obvious taxi.'

'And the other?' asked the woman.

'They want to be seen,' Harry said. 'Oldest trick in the book – create a diversion. We chase up there and they hit us elsewhere.'

'Well, the army doesn't agree with you,' said the woman, 'they only gave it a Grade Five. Anyway, why are you so concerned about the Golan?'

Harry turned on her, his face flushed.

'Just go and paint your bloody nails,' he snapped.

Eshan took him firmly by the arm and returned him to his own office. Harry picked up his phone. 'I'm calling Tel Aviv to tell them to upgrade their warning. Can I take your jeep? I'm going up there, but my car wouldn't make it.'

'I'll come with you,' Eshan replied immediately, reaching into a desk drawer and removing a spare clip for his gun. 'You'll need a hand.'

Harry turned to him in surprise.

'It's okay. I only want the car. I'm fine on my own.'

'Look, I'm bored shitless sitting here behind a bloody desk. I'm coming.'

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‘If you insist.’

Harry connected to IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, but nobody was prepared to sanction a costly security alert. Harry slammed down the phone.

3

Coming out of his apartment, his Uzi in one hand and Ami’s teddy bear in the other, Harry bumped into an elderly neighbour. She wished him a pleasant evening. Harry tossed the weapon on the rear seat of Eshan’s car and directed him out of Tiberias.

‘I know the road as far as Deganya,’ said Eshan. ‘You’ll have to show me after that.’

‘It’s easy.’

‘There’s a radio there,’ said Eshan. ‘Do you have the frequency of this settlement?’

‘No, but it’s no use anyway. They’re surrounded by ridges and can barely get through to the kibbutz at Meitzar.’ He thumped the dashboard in frustration. ‘Shit! I should have phoned the bloody kibbutz. I’ll call them now, the number’s still on my pager.’

He took his mobile from his pocket and punched in the number, only to grimace with disappointment.

‘Useless bloody Cellcom – no signal strength. Who are you with?’

‘I’m the same. We can try later.’

They drove in silence. It was a cloudless evening, and dusk became darkness as they left Tiberias along the busy highway south. A slim crescent moon cast little light on the waters of Lake Galilee beside them. They passed through the small town of Kinneret and stopped to fuel the car, noticing a warm southerly wind had suddenly sprung up, raising white horses on the lake’s surface visible in the town’s lights. A problem arose as Harry went to pay for the petrol. The young attendant had an attitude, and refused to speak Hebrew, pretending he could speak only Arabic. Eshan tensed, prepared for a confrontation, but Harry stood between them.

‘Not now,’ Harry insisted. ‘Come back later if you want.’

Eshan shrugged and walked out. Harry paid the bill hurriedly. Back in the car Eshan sat in seething silence. Just outside the town Harry pointed to his left.

'There's a beach down there,' he said, instantly regretting he had spoken, but with no choice but to continue. 'You can't see it now, but it's where we had Ami's birthday party. Just us and an Irish couple with their baby.'

'Irish?' Eshan managed to load a one word question with menace.

'Yeah.' Harry did not care. Eshan could think whatever he wanted. 'Rachel's best friend is Irish. Her husband's with UNIFIL.'

'I presume you registered that?' asked Eshan coldly. Relationships between the Israeli military and the Irish troops in UNIFIL, the United Nations peace-keeping force in Lebanon, were at an all time low. Any contact, even social, between a Shin Bet agent and a member of UNIFIL had to be reported.

'Of course I did.'

Eshan raised his eyebrows in disbelief but Harry turned away. He tried the mobile again, but the signal strength had not improved. Ten minutes later they reached Deganya, one of the pioneer kibbutzim. Traffic was still heavy, unusual for a Tuesday evening. Beyond Deganya Harry instructed Eshan to take a turnoff to the left, along the southern shores of the lake towards the well signposted resort complex of Hamat Gader. They exited the busy highway, intermittently lit with huge advertising billboards, onto a quieter secondary road. Although they had now left Israel proper they saw little evidence they had entered what was technically a foreign country, an area captured from Syria in the 1967 war and still subject to bitter dispute. Darkness surrounded them, as few people lived outside the fortified kibbutzim or settlements.

'That's it with the traffic,' Harry pointed to a small sign, 'and with the mobiles. No coverage at all here – we're in the Golan. It's a crappy road from now.'

'Don't know what you're complaining about, this is easy,' Eshan said.

'It's all right now, but wait till we get to Hamat Gader. Then you'll know what I'm talking about.'

It was eerily quiet, and few cars passed them in either direction. As they approached the bright lights of Hamat Gader, Harry instructed Eshan to take another turnoff left, and their route immediately deteriorated to a bumpy narrow road.

'I've only driven this in the daylight,' stressed Harry, 'and it scared the shit

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out of me then. Do you want me to drive, I know it?’

‘I can manage.’

They drove up a seemingly endless series of tortuous bends. After ten nervous kilometres, which took more than forty minutes, they emerged onto a plateau, still in total blackness and silence. Three kilometres farther bright lights appeared.

‘That it?’ asked Eshan.

‘No, it’s another kibbutz. Keep an eye out for a small turn to the right.’

Harry noticed two sets of vehicle lights rapidly approaching from the side road.

‘Something’s coming. Better slow down!’

Eshan halted and two jeeps full of soldiers screeched onto the main road and sped away into the distance.

‘What’s that about?’

‘No idea. Just keep going.’

They turned onto the minor road, but around the second corner their car lights illuminated a darkened IDF transporter with three soldiers on it, all smoking. Eshan stopped beside the vehicle. The soldiers stepped out of the beam of the car lights and approached suspiciously. They were young, definitely army conscripts. Harry opened his door, getting out with his hands elevated. Eshan did the same on the other side.

‘What are you guys doing?’ demanded one soldier – a small youth wearing spectacles and an oversize helmet.

‘Who’s in charge?’ Harry ignored the question. He was only too aware of the threats posed by heavily armed youngsters with no senior officer in sight.

‘I am,’ came a voice from the bushes on the left as an IDF sergeant appeared, fastening his trousers. ‘Go for a shit, and two assholes appear.’ He laughed. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’m getting my ID,’ replied Harry, as he reached into his pocket and took out his card. The sergeant examined it and looked at the two men with new respect. The young soldiers put down their weapons as Harry explained about the satellite images.

‘That fits,’ said the sergeant. ‘Those guys in the jeeps are civilians from the Golan militia. They’ve been called to the kibbutz at Ramat Magshim – apparently somebody has attacked there. Most of the militia are from Kibbutz

Meitzar, but three are from your settlement.'

Harry turned, his face reddened and contorted.

'What! They've left the settlement?'

'Looks like it,' shrugged the sergeant.

Harry could barely contain himself as he and Eshan rushed back to their car.

'What's the frequency of the settlement?' Harry called out to the sergeant as Eshan prepared to drive away.

'Don't know, but I have the kibbutz's.'

'Give it to me.'

The soldier shouted it out as both vehicles passed each other and drove off in opposite directions.

'They didn't seem too worried,' Eshan said.

'Fucking idiots! There's only three in the settlement with any training and they've all just pissed off. Hand me that radio.'

Harry raised the kibbutz and passed on the details of his conversation with the soldiers.

'Call the settlement and warn them about the diversion. And tell them we're coming. Give me their frequency and I'll try as well.'

'Sure.'

'How far is it from here?'

'Roughly thirty minutes,' the kibbutznik estimated. 'Be careful of the track, it's terrible.'

'I know.'

'Leave your lights on and blow the horn a few times,' she continued. 'The gate's always locked, but they'll hear you. We'd send someone up but a lot of our guys have gone with the militia. Sorry.'

'Not your fault. Thanks.'

Fifteen tense minutes later Harry pointed out an even narrower track, barely visible just before the gate of Kibbutz Meitzar. As they turned onto the hard packed dirt road Eshan engaged the four-wheel drive.

'What a crappy road! How did they get a caravan up here?'

'Don't know, but I saw four there.'

As Eshan negotiated the rutted and winding stony trail Harry repeatedly attempted to contact the settlement, but there was no answer. He was close to

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panic as he called the kibbutz again.

‘Any reply?’

‘No, but I’ll keep on trying.’

Eshan stopped the car thirty metres from the settlement gate and cut the engine, leaving the lights on. All was silent except for the moan of the wind. A head high wire fence ringed the settlement, and they could just about make out the outlines of caravans and low buildings. There were no visible lights in the settlement, and all around was darkness.

‘I’m not happy about this!’ Harry’s voice trembled with worry. ‘There’s no light, and I can’t hear the generator.’

‘The wind could be carrying the sound away,’ Eshan whispered, ‘or maybe they turn it off at night. I’ll drive up to the gate and sound the horn.’

‘I’m not happy about that either, but I can’t think of anything better.’

Eshan restarted the engine and moved slowly to the locked gate, a simple four barred structure attached to the wire fence on either side. He sounded the horn repeatedly, but there was no response. He beeped once more.

‘Let’s go,’ interrupted Harry. ‘Now. Quickly.’

‘I’ve a flashlight somewhere.’ Eshan had a hurried look, and then cursed. ‘Shit, can’t find it. Did you bring one?’

‘No. Come on. I’ll go first – they know me. Leave the car lights on.’

Without waiting for a reply Harry left the car and began to climb over the gate into the silent settlement.