

P R O L O G U E

Jerusalem, March 5, 1991

7:15 a.m.

The mild morning air hinted at the promise of a brilliant spring as Israeli Finance Minister Uzi Kopelman walked briskly along an ancient narrow corridor of the Jewish Quarter leading to the Zion Gate.

Earlier that morning, in remembrance of his father who was killed, three years to the date, by a powerful bomb a Muslim terrorist had detonated in a crowded Tel Aviv restaurant, he had prayed at the Western Wall.

On his way to an emergency meeting with the director of Israeli Intelligence, his thoughts dwelled on the alarming magnitude of the financial transactions he had uncovered a day earlier.

Moments after passing an alleyway, Kopelman felt a subtle sting on the back of his neck. Instinctively raising his open right hand, the former captain of the Israeli Army soccer team swatted his neck and continued walking.

Less than a minute later, his limbs suddenly gripped by muscle paralysis, he staggered and fell to the stone pavement. Unable to move his body, he stared up in terror at the masked figure garbed in an Arab caftan looming above him. Knowing he couldn't defend himself, his heart sank.

Brandishing a dagger, the figure glared at Kopelman and said, taunting him, "You think you can stop us—you're wrong. Let this be a lesson to those who would challenge the will of God."

His energy drained, gasping for breath, Kopelman murmured in a low voice, "Please . . . I mean you no harm. Don't—"

But it was too late. Intent on fulfilling his mission, the assassin raised his dagger and plunged it deep into Uzi Kopelman's chest.

C H A P T E R 1

It had been a long day for Harry A. McClure. At 12:20 a.m., after a late evening dinner with the chairman of a Japanese electronics manufacturer, his mind and body craved sleep. Returning to the midtown brownstone which served as both his company's offices and New York residence, he placed his right index finger against a sensor pad inconspicuously mounted to the right side of the front door. Moments after the stately door silently closed behind him, an elevator whisked him to the top floor where, unexpectedly, the distinctive ringing of his private phone shattered the serenity of the night.

The president of an international security-consulting firm, McClure surmised the late-night caller was more than likely one of a select group of clients who paid a substantial retainer for his services. Dashing down the hall to his study, he reached for the red phone on his desk and answered in a subdued tone.

"Hello?"

"Harry . . . is that you?" the caller demanded.

McClure recognized the distinctive "Texas twang" of Saunders McGee, Chairman of Bethlehem Oil, and eased into his desk chair.

"Good evening, Saunders. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Sorry to call so late, but I've been trying to reach you for hours. We've got a big problem in Sudan. In retaliation of our government's recent decision to list it as a state sponsor of terrorism, the Premier, Omar al-Bashir, is encouraging the Janjaweed militia to attack American operations in Sudan."

On assignment for Bethlehem Oil McClure had traveled to Sudan several times in the past two years and was familiar with Bethlehem's sizeable holdings there. Loosening his tie, he pressed the phone to his ear.

"How can I help you, Saunders?"

"We've got to get our engineering and geological team out of Sudan ASAP. I know you have friends in the Sudanese government, so I'd like you to head the team which is preparing, as we speak, to fly to there. Whatever it takes . . . I want them back on American soil alive."

"How much time do we have?"

"Not much. You've got to be in and out of the Sudan by 11 tonight."

Taking a deep breath, McClure shot back, "You realize there won't be any time to deal with unforeseen problems?"

“Yes, I understand, but we don’t have a choice. Our geological exploration team in Sudan unexpectedly discovered a substantial deposit of uranium-238. If we don’t act quickly, their survey maps might end up in the wrong hands.”

McClure thought for a moment. “If I’m not mistaken, uranium-238 can be converted into plutonium, which then can be used to make a nuclear bomb?”

“Yes, and I don’t want that to happen.”

McClure shook his head and smiled to himself. *So that’s it.*

McGee pressed. “Can I count on you, Harry?”

Propping himself up in his desk chair, McClure replied smugly, “Have I ever let you down?”

Gratified, McGee continued. “A car will pick you up at your brownstone in three hours and take you to Teterboro Airport where our Gulfstream is being readied for flight. My assistant, Carl Anderson, will be at the airport to fill you in on the details. Good luck, Harry!”

The Bethlehem Oil Gulfstream landed without incident in Khartoum. Met by a bribed high-ranking Sudanese government minister, the aircraft quickly refueled and taxied to a holding area alongside of the main runway. At 11:31 p.m., making final preparations for departure, McClure carefully checked the employee roster. Everyone was accounted for except Bart Rollins, the chief geologist.

The previous day, Rollins had traveled to an area in northern Sudan, close to the Libyan border, to verify the discovery of the uranium-238 reserve.

He knew from an associate with whom he had been in radio contact earlier in the day that a special plane had been dispatched to evacuate Bethlehem Oil employees from Sudan.

“Bart,” the associate had warned, “you must be at the airport no later than 11 p.m. or you’ll miss the plane and be stranded in Sudan.” Rollins, known for being punctual, was now more than 35 minutes late. Growing anxious, McClure paced in the cockpit. Checking his watch again, he turned to the pilot. “It’s 11:36. We’ll give him until 11:45, but that’s it.”

The pilot, an Air Force veteran who had served in Vietnam, stared at McClure incredulously.

“Mr. McClure, we’ve already cut our chances of getting out of here damn close.”

Fixing his eyes on the pilot, McClure responded, “Get the plane ready for immediate takeoff.”

Nodding, a slight smile on his face, the pilot said, “Okay, we’ll be ready.”

At 11:45 p.m., McClure ordered the aircraft door closed. Just as he was about to signal the pilot to take off, a female voice cried out, “I think I see him.” Jan Fleming, a geologist who worked for Rollins, had spotted the headlights of an approaching vehicle flashing in the distance.

Peering through another window, McClure raised the night vision binoculars suspended from his neck and focused on the flashing lights. Was this a signal or a trap? Making a split-second decision, he decided to wait a few additional minutes.

As the vehicle came within 500 feet of the aircraft, he recognized the distinctive “BO” markings on the hood of the Land Rover and the tricolor pennant flapping on the radio antennae. A cracked windshield and bullet holes in its side panels confirmed the vehicle had been fired on.

A moment after the Land Rover screeched to a halt five feet from the aircraft door, Rollins, a travel bag dangling from his shoulder, leaped from the vehicle and sprinted onto the aircraft. Quickly, the crew sealed the aircraft door.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” McClure barked to the pilot through the open cockpit door.

A loud explosion lit the night sky as the Gulfstream, filled with Bethlehem Oil Company employees, taxied down the runway, majestically raised itself into the air, and headed for Nairobi, Kenya. The time on McClure’s watch read 11:51 p.m.

Nine minutes later, hundreds of Janjaweed militia overran the last Bethlehem Oil Company facility two miles from Khartoum.