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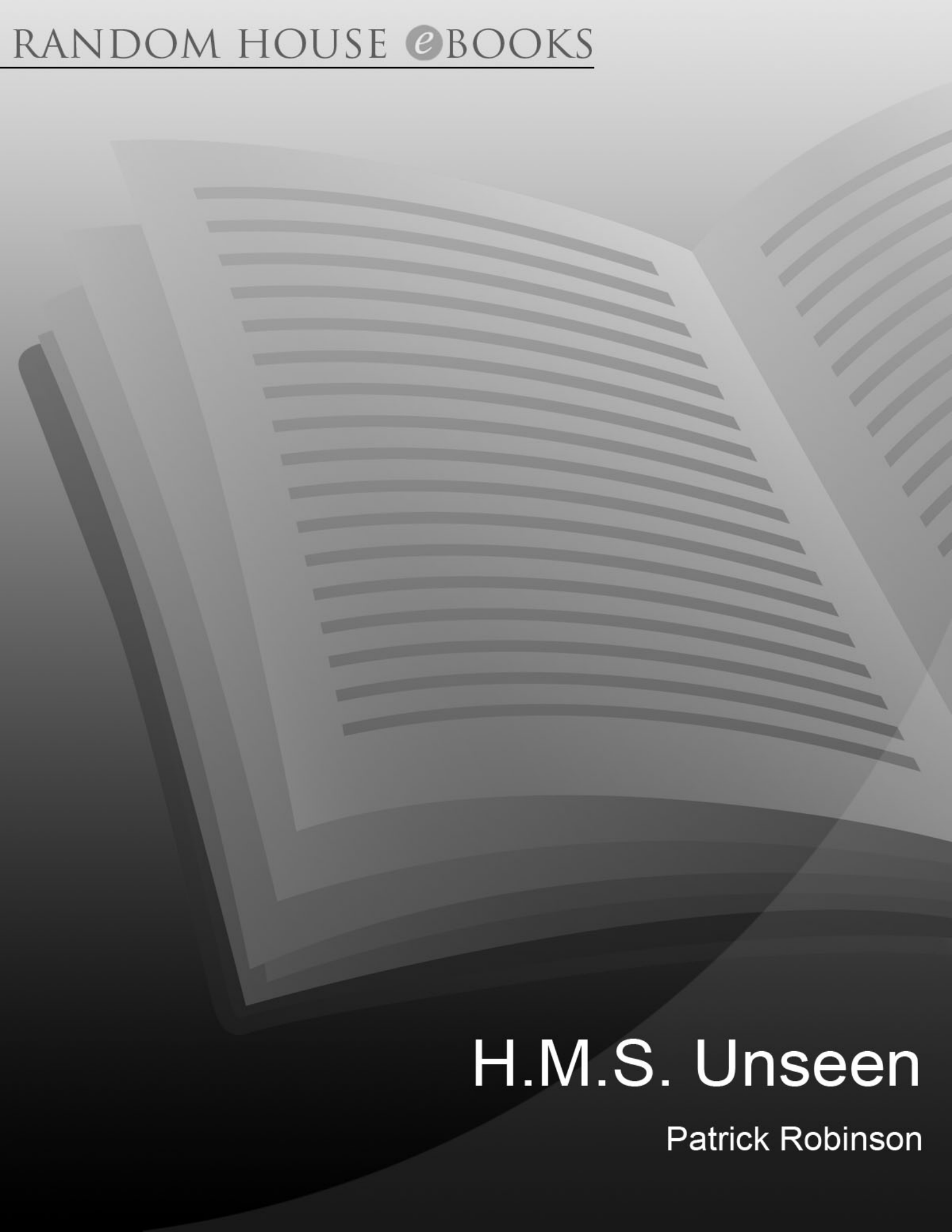


H.M.S. Unseen

Patrick Robinson

Contents

About the Book

The deadliest ship in the world has fallen into the hands of a terrorist enemy – the submariner believed to be behind the destruction of the Thomas Jefferson has returned to seek his revenge on his Iraqi paymasters and the country that betrayed him. He defects to Iran, where he is helped in his plan to transform a stolen submarine into a unique weapon capable of causing the most shocking air strikes in an American history. His vengeance on the US is devastating, H. M. S. Unseen is lost, and the blame appears to lie with Iraq. It is up to Admiral Arnold Morgan, to prove his suspicions that Iraq isn’t responsible, and that Ben Adnam is the only man skilful enough to orchestrate such an attack. And he must stop him, whatever the cost ...

About the Author

Patrick Robinson is the author of seven international bestsellers, as well as his forthcoming novel, *Hunter Killer*. He is also the author of several non-fiction bestsellers including *True Blue* (with Dan Topolski) and *Born to Win*. He is the co-author with Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward of *One Hundred Days*.

Also by Patrick Robinson

Nimitz Class
Kilo Class
Seawolf
The Shark Mutiny
Barracuda 945
Scimitar SL-2
Hunter Killer

Non fiction
Classic Lines
Decade of Champions
The Golden Post
Born to Win
True Blue
One Hundred Days
Horsetrader

H.M.S. Unseen

Patrick Robinson

arrow books

This book is respectfully dedicated to the military Intelligence services of both the United States and Great Britain, the men who watch the oceans and the skies, and whose diligence and brilliance are often unheralded.

Acknowledgements

For the third time, Admiral Sir John Woodward was my principal technical advisor in the construction of a novel. HMS *Unseen,* a stealthy Royal Navy submarine now being leased to an overseas government, was chosen for the title as it represents the central area of the book.

The Admiral was obliged to use all of his considerable ingenuity to convert it into precisely the kind of boat we required for the plot. He was also obliged to 'invent' a missile system which would (a) stand some chance of working, and (b) not take us too far into the realms of the impossible.

Loyally, my supersonic flight advisor said it would never work, could not achieve its objective. The Admiral disagreed . . . 'maybe not today . . . but in six years?'

Their good-natured disagreement, conducted over several high-tech weeks, has, I hope, brought *HMS Unseen* (the novel) home with suitable, grim reality, and I thank them both.

Readers may note a stark similarity between an event in this book and a later actual happening on the world stage. It was recounted in the completed manuscript of *HMS Unseen* several months before it actually happened, and for this I am again grateful to Admiral Woodward.

My thanks too, to my two Scottish advisors (rural, geographic and social), Penelope Enthoven and Olivia Oaks. For insights and religious advice concerning the Muslim faith, I am indebted to the kindly and patient Syed Nawshadamir (Ronnie), originally from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and now of Dublin, Ireland.

Patrick Robinson

Prologue

January 17, 2006.

IT WAS A morning of savage cold. The raw, ravenous January wind hurled snow at the driver's side of the car as the vehicle crunched along a freezing man-made ravine between drifts ploughed a dozen feet high. It had been snowing here in Newfoundland now for over three months. But Bart Hamm did not care. He chuckled at the banter of the local radio station's DJ as he pressed the car on through the howling polar blizzard of his homeland, heading resolutely for the big trans-Atlantic air base outside the eastern town of Gander.

Bart had been working there for ten years now and he was used to the job's routines and regimentation. Unlike most of the working people of the island's coasts, he never had to worry about the cold. All through the autumn and winter the weather in Newfoundland is unbearable, except to a polar bear or possibly an Eskimo. But Bart was the first male member of his family in five generations not to have gone to sea, his attitude to life being guided by one solitary thought: *Whatever the disadvantages may be to this job, whatever the freedoms I have sacrificed, it's a helluva lot better than being out in a fishing boat*.

The Hamms were from the tiny port of St Anthony, way up on the northern peninsula. Down the years since the middle of the 19th century they had treasured their independence, earning a harsh living from the dark, sullen waters that surge around the Labrador coast and the Western Atlantic. In the past century the Hamms had been saltbankers, sailing the big schooners out to the Grand Banks for cod;

they had fished for turbot from the draggers, they had trapped deep-water lobsters, they had hunted seals out on the ice at the end of winter. A lot of teak-hard, rock-steady men named Hamm had drowned in pursuit of this most dangerous of industries – three in one day back in the early 1980s when a fishing boat out of St Anthony had iced up and capsized in a gale east of Grey Islands. Bart's father had been one of the men lost in that incident, and Bart himself, his only son, had never quite recovered from the ordeal of waiting helplessly with his mother and sister for six hours in the snow and a biting nor'easter on the little town jetty. Every 30 minutes, they had walked up to the harbormaster's shed, and Bart had never forgotten the old man repeating over and over, into the radio, 'This is St Anthony . . . come in *Seabird II* . . . come in *Seabird II . . . Please* come in *Seabird II.'* But there had always been just silence in reply.

That had been 23 years ago, when Bart had been 13; it was the day he knew that, whatever else, he was never going to become a fisherman.

Bart was a typical member of the Hamm family: thoughtful, quiet, accepting and as strong as a stud-bull. He was a good mathematician, and had won a scholarship to the Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John's, where he had earned two degrees, one in mathematics and the other in physics. He possessed the perfect temperament for an air-traffic control officer, and had settled into a well paid place in one of the warmest, most protected modern buildings in the entire country. Stormswept ATC Gander is where they check in every incoming trans-Atlantic flight to Canada and the northern United States, the big passenger jets heading back into the civilized world from under the huge freezing sky which umbrellas the desolate North Atlantic waters at the 30º line of longitude. Bart loved the job, and not just because of the warmth. He had excellent

powers of concentration, and his rise to supervisor would not be long in coming.

Today, driving through the snow at half past six in the morning, headlights cutting through the endless winter darkness, Bart was starting a seven-hour shift with an hour's break midway. He would begin at the busiest part of the morning – any time after seven you were talking to a different airliner every three minutes, and you had to stay alert, on top of your game, every moment of your shift. The Gander Station was a key ingredient in Atlantic air-traffic safety, and the controllers there were inevitably the first to know of any problem.

Today Bart's shift began at 0700. And he began to talk into his headset almost immediately he arrived at his station, connected on the HF radio to the great armada of passenger jets trundling westward, identifying themselves in their airline's code and then reporting their height, speed and position. At 0717 he was talking to the co-pilot of a Lufthansa Boeing 747, out on 40°W, handing him a weather check and confirming the position of an offshore blizzard to the south, off the coast of Maine.

Two minutes later he picked up a new call and his heart, as always, skipped a beat. This was Concorde, British Airways' supersonic star of the North Atlantic, streaking across the sky at 1330 mph. Bart heard a calm British voice saying, 'Good morning, Gander. Speedbird Concorde zero-zero-one. Flight level five-four-zero to New York. Mach–2. Three-zero-west, five-zero-north at 1219 GMT. ETA 40 West 1241 GMT. Over.'

Bart replied carefully. 'Roger that, Speedbird zero-zero-one. We'll be waiting 1241. Over.'

The information was entered on his screen, and at 0738 Bart was waiting. Concorde was usually a couple of minutes early calling in because of the high speed at which she crossed the lines of longitude. To cover the 450 miles between 30°W and 40°W, she required only 22 minutes.

At 0740 he was still waiting, but nothing was coming through from the cockpit of the packed British supersonic craft as she raced through the skies out on the very edge of space.

Bart was already, by this time, feeling distinctly uneasy. He watched the digital clock in front of him go to 0741, and he knew that Concorde must be well past 40°W. But where the hell was she? At 0743 and 40 seconds he opened his High Frequency line and went to SELCAL (selective calling), causing two warning tones to sound in Concorde's cockpit to alert the pilots to the signals. He began transmitting on the private voice channel. But there was no reply.

Seconds later he transmitted a radio signal designed to light up two amber bulbs right in the pilot's line of vision and followed this up with: 'Speedbird zero-zero-one, this is Gander. How do you read? Speedbird zero-zero-one, this is Gander. How do you read?'

By now his heart was pounding. He felt as if he were driving the supersonic jet himself, and he willed the voice of the British pilot to come crackling onto the headset. But there was nothing. 'Speedbird zero-zero-one, this is Gander. How do you read?' Frightened now, Bart raised his voice and departed from the procedural wording. 'Speedbird zero-zero-one, please come in. *Please* come in.'

He checked his own electronic connections, checked every step he was taking. But he could not remove the lump in his throat, and, unaccountably, a new image stood before his mind's eye – the image that still wakened him on stormy nights, the image of himself on that terrible morning in St Anthony when he had stood in the snow and then in the radio shed, clutching the hand of his mother and praying for news of his lost father, the skipper of the missing fishing boat *Seabird II*.

He tried one more time, calling through to the cockpit of the Concorde. His hand was shaking as he finally pressed the switch to summon his supervisor. At 0745 Concorde

should have been more than 100 miles beyond 40°W; continued radio silence could only be the harbinger of disaster. Because this aircraft was nothing short of a flying hi-tech masterpiece in which electronic backup was layered threefold.

At that precise time, Air-Traffic Control Gander sounded the alarm that a major passenger airliner was almost certainly down in the North Atlantic. They alerted British Airways and the Canadian and US navies, and sounded the alarm on the international search and rescue wavebands.

The naval drills were routine and precise. Commanding officers were ordered to divert ships into the area where Concorde must have hit the ocean. While all this was happening, the haunted face of Bart Hamm was still staring into his screen as he listened to his headset. His urgent, despairing voice continued broadcasting, unanswered, on the great plane's private frequency: 'Speedbird zero-zero-one, this is Gander. Gander Oceanic Control. Please come in, Speedbird. *Please* answer. Speedbird zero-zero-one.'

One

May 26, 2004.

THE LIGHT WAS fading now along Haifa Street, and it was almost impossible to spot any westerners in this seething, poor section of Baghdad. Men in *galabiyyas*, long loose shirts, occupied much of the dirty sidewalks, sitting cross-legged, smoking waterpipes, selling small items of jewelry and copper. On one side of the main thoroughfare, dark narrow streets ran off toward the slow-flowing Tigris river. Tiny car workshops were somehow crammed along here between the cramped, decaying houses. The stifling smell of oil and axle grease mingled with the dark aromas of thick, black sweet coffee, incense, charcoal fires, cinnamon, sandalwood and baking bread.

He should have stood out a mile, wearing a smoothly cut, gray Western suit as he hurried out from the inner canyon of a green-painted garage. The club tie should have given him away, and certainly the highly polished shoes. But he turned around as he walked out and embraced the elderly, oil-coated mechanic with warmth and affection, staring hard into the man's eyes – an unmistakable Arab gesture, the gesture of a Bedouin.

No doubt, the man was an Arab, and he caused few heads to turn as he headed back west toward Haifa Street, cramming a length of electrical wire into his pocket as he went. He seemed at home here in this crowded, sprawling market, striding past the fruit and vegetable stalls and nodding occasionally at a purveyor of spices or a rug-seller. He held his head high, and the dark trimmed beard gave him the facial look of an ancient caliph. His name was

obscure, foreign-sounding to an Arab. The people called him Eilat. But, in the circles that knew his trade he was more formally referred to as Eilat One.

He made just one more stop, at a dingy hardware store 40 yards before the left turn onto the Ahrar Bridge. When he emerged ten minutes later he was carrying a white box with a picture of a lightbulb on the outside and a roll of wide gray heavy-duty, plastic tape, the regular kind that holds United Parcel together all over the world.

Eilat kept walking fast, sometimes straying off the sidewalk to avoid stragglers. He was thickset in build, no more than 5 feet 10 inches tall. He crossed the bridge into the Rusafah side of Baghdad and made his way up Rashid Street. In his left jacket pocket there was a small leather box containing Iraq's national Medal of Honor, which had been presented to him personally that morning by the somewhat erratic president of the country. The coveted medal counted, he feared, for little.

There had been something in the manner of the President which he had found disturbing. They did not know each other well, but even so the uneasy distance between them had been noticeable. The President was known for the almost ecstatic greetings he gave to those who had served him faithfully, but there had been no such display of emotion that morning. Eilat One had been greeted as a stranger and he had left as a stranger, escorted in by two guards and escorted out again by the same men. The President had seemed to avoid eye contact.

And now the 44-year-old intelligence agent experienced the same chill that men of his calling have variously felt over the years in most countries in the world, the icy realization that, no matter what their achievements, the past had gone and time had rolled forward. The spy was being sent back out into the cold. Or, put another way, the spy had gone beyond his usefulness to his master. In the

case of Eilat One, he might simply have become too important. And there was only one solution for that.

Eilat believed they were going to kill him. He further believed they were going to kill him tonight. He guessed there was already a surveillance team watching his little house, set in a narrow alley up toward Al–Jamouri Street. He would be wary, and he would be calmly self-controlled. There could be only one possible outcome of any assassination attempt on his life.

Still walking swiftly, he reached the huge wide-open expanse of Rusata Square. The streetlights were on now, but this square needed no extra illumination. A 50-foot-high portrait of the President was floodlit by more voltage than all the city streetlights put together. Eilat swung right, casting his eyes away from the searing dazzle of his leader, and pressed on eastward toward the great adjoining Amin Square with its mosques and cheap hotels.

Now he began to walk more slowly, tucking his white box under his arm, and staying to the right, hard against the buildings. The traffic was heavy, but he had no need to leave the sidewalk. Almost subconsciously he slipped into the soft stride of the Bedouin, moving lightly, feeling at the small of his back the handle of the long stiletto-bladed tribal knife that was his constant companion in times of personal threat.

He followed the late shoppers into Al–Jamouri Street and slowed almost to a stop as he reached an alleyway beside a small hotel. Then he quickened again and walked straight past the narrow walkway, with its solitary dim streetlight about halfway along. He gave a passing glance into the alley and saw that it was empty except for two cars parked at the far end. They were empty too, unless the passengers were curled up on the floor. Eilat had excellent eyesight, and was good at remembering pictures in his mind.

And now he stopped completely. He stood apparently distracted outside the hotel, looking at his watch, checking

the passers-by, watching for someone who hesitated, someone who might slow down and stop, just as he had done. Twenty seconds later he moved into the alley and walked slowly toward a narrow white door that opened through a high stone wall into a courtyard that housed the Baghdad headquarters of Eilat One.

He heard with satisfaction the rusty grind and squeak of the hinges on the outside gate. He walked past an old bicycle and opened the door to his dark, cool house noiselessly. ‘I wonder if they’ll come as if in friendship,’ he said to himself. ‘Or will they just come busting in with a Kalashnikov and blow the place apart?’

He turned on the light-switch in the wide downstairs hall and checked the setting on the low laser beam he had installed to inform him if anyone had entered during his absence. There had been nobody. The white light on the wall panel, which flickered red if anyone had opened a window, was steady.

On reflection, he thought, *they’ll probably try to take me out in the small hours of the morning. Stealth will be their method, and I suspect they’ll use knives. Messy, but silent. At least, that’s what I’d do if I were an assassin. I can’t see them risking gunfire, and I can’t imagine them confronting me, even in friendship. Not with* my *reputation.*

It was after 8pm now. Eilat went to work with two screwdrivers, a large one for fastening a bracket into the wall and a small one, for electrical connections. ‘The key to murder in the dead of night,’ he muttered, ‘is vision. Night vision.’

When his tasks were completed he placed a firm wooden chair behind the door, turned out every light and drew the shades across the windows. He settled down to wait in the pitch black. Eyes open wide, he strained to make out shapes in the darkness; it was a full 20 minutes before he could distinguish the curved outline of the water pitcher on the table at the end of the hall.

Midnight came and went. Still Eilat waited calmly. He hoped there would not be more than three of them but, if there were . . . well, so be it.

At lam he stood up, walked to the pitcher and poured himself a drink, splashing the water into a stone cup. No spillage. Then he walked back to his chair behind the door without crashing into it. His nightsight was perfect now, a circumstance which he would use to best advantage. The last thing he wanted was ‘equal terms’.

They came for him at 19 minutes after 2am. Eilat heard the gate squeak and the doorknob turn, and was on his feet. The first man, dressed in dark combat gear with desert boots, entered silently. A second man followed the first, sensed rather than observed. Eilat remained by the door with his eyes clenched shut, his hands covering his face, protecting his night vision from the glow of the city outside.

Suddenly, very suddenly, without opening his eyes, he moved. Raising his right foot he booted the door shut with shuddering impact. And then he turned toward the wall again, his eyes still clenched tight.

The two visitors turned automatically to the slammed door. The big theatrical lightbulb set above it came on with blinding brightness and caught them bang in its ferocious glare. For a split second the men stood transfixed like rabbits in a spotlight. Their hands flew to their faces, but it was too late. The bulb was on for only two seconds but it destroyed their night vision completely at a vital moment for them both. And Eilat still had his.

He moved quickly behind the unseeing first man and crashed a smooth, heavy glass paperweight into the critical nerve-center behind the intruder’s right ear. He slammed the second assassin with a similar blackout blow, then turned and softly opened the door. ‘I suppose they have a lookout,’ he murmured to himself. ‘I may have to kill him as well.’

He walked swiftly across the yard and, ignoring the gate, climbed to the top of the wall with the assistance of an old wooden bench. For two minutes he scoured the alley with his gaze, watching for a movement, any movement, a person, any person. But there was nothing.

Finally he stepped down and walked back into the house. Once he was in the main room he switched on a small desk-light and collected his roll of sticky plastic masking tape. Slowly and with steady efficiency he bound together the wrists and ankles of the unconscious intruders using layers of tape. Then he placed one wide piece right across each of their mouths and arranged the two inert bodies to his satisfaction, dragging them down the middle of the hall and resting the head and shoulders of the second across the first man's chest. Immediately after that he went into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of the coffee which had been percolating for the past several hours. Exactly eleven minutes had elapsed since Eilat had floored his assailants. He returned to the hall, holding his stiletto-bladed knife, and positioned himself right behind the head of the uppermost man, who was just regaining consciousness.

Leaning over, Eilat made a small incision on the left-hand side of the assassin's throat. Then, with a surgical twist of the knife, he severed the jugular vein, the third largest artery in the human body. He stepped back quickly to avoid the surges of blood. After a moment he walked back to the kitchen and finished his coffee.

Grunts from the prostrate man on the floor drew him back to the hall a few minutes later. The assassin's eyes were wide with terror as his colleague bled messily to death all over him. Almost a half-gallon of blood now saturated the two tangled bodies and still more was pumping out of the dying man's neck wound.

'*Salam aleikom* – and perhaps sooner than you think,' said Eilat. 'I expect you've noticed I just cut your assistant's jugular. In a few moments I shall have absolutely no

hesitation in doing precisely the same to you. That would give you about eight minutes to live. It takes that long, you know, for six pints of blood to unload. He's just about gone now. Were I you I should wish him well in the arms of Allah.'

Eilat walked away, seemingly indifferent to the frenzied head-shaking, two-footed kicking and muffled screams of the man who still lived. When he returned he was once more carrying the knife.

Again he leaned over, careful to avoid getting blood on his suit, and placed the sharp tip of the weapon firmly against the assassin's throat. When he spoke now it was with a hard edge to his voice. 'If you want to live you will tell me precisely who sent you, precisely who issued your orders. You will speak softly when I remove the tape from your mouth. If I suspect a lie, you'll be on your way to join your colleague. If you speak too loudly, the result will be the same. It takes about eight minutes, as I told you.'

With his left hand he slowly ripped the tape from the man's lips. With his right he pressed the knife harder into the assassin's throat, though still not making a cut, and said: 'Speak softly and truthfully.'

'The President, sir. He ordered it himself,' the man blurted. Trembling uncontrollably, he poured out a mixture of facts and implorations. 'Please don't kill me – I have a wife, children. Please . . . The President, he told my boss what we were to do. I was told to be in attendance in the President's office today so I'd know who you were. My boss was there too.' Eilat nodded. He had already recognized the dying man as one of the guards who had escorted him into the President's presence. 'He said you were to die after midnight . . . quietly. Please, sir, don't kill me. I had no choice . . .'

Eilat removed the knife and stuck a new piece of tape hard across the man's mouth. Then he walked back into the main room and took from a drawer three passports and some travel agency documents. He slipped the paperweight

into his pocket; he would keep it as a souvenir of tonight's encounter. Then he straightened his tie, buttoned his jacket and moved back into the hall, putting the passports and documents on the table by the water pitcher in plain view of the bloodsoaked assassin.

He went into the bathroom, collected his shaving gear, toothpaste and soap, and re-emerged holding a small, smart-looking leather case. He turned out all of the lights and sat quietly in the darkness for fifteen minutes while the irises of his eyes slowly grew larger, recovering his night vision. Eventually he stood up and said casually, 'Well, I'm going now. And I won't be back for a while. I have rather a long journey ahead of me. I expect they'll send someone for you in a few hours. By the way, you don't have a lookout posted in the alley, do you? Don't lie to me, because if I have to kill him I'll come back here immediately and kill you as well.'

He felt rather than saw the man shake his head feverishly. 'Very well, old chap,' said Eilat. 'I expect you won't want to see me again. And nor will you, unless of course you've lied to me.'

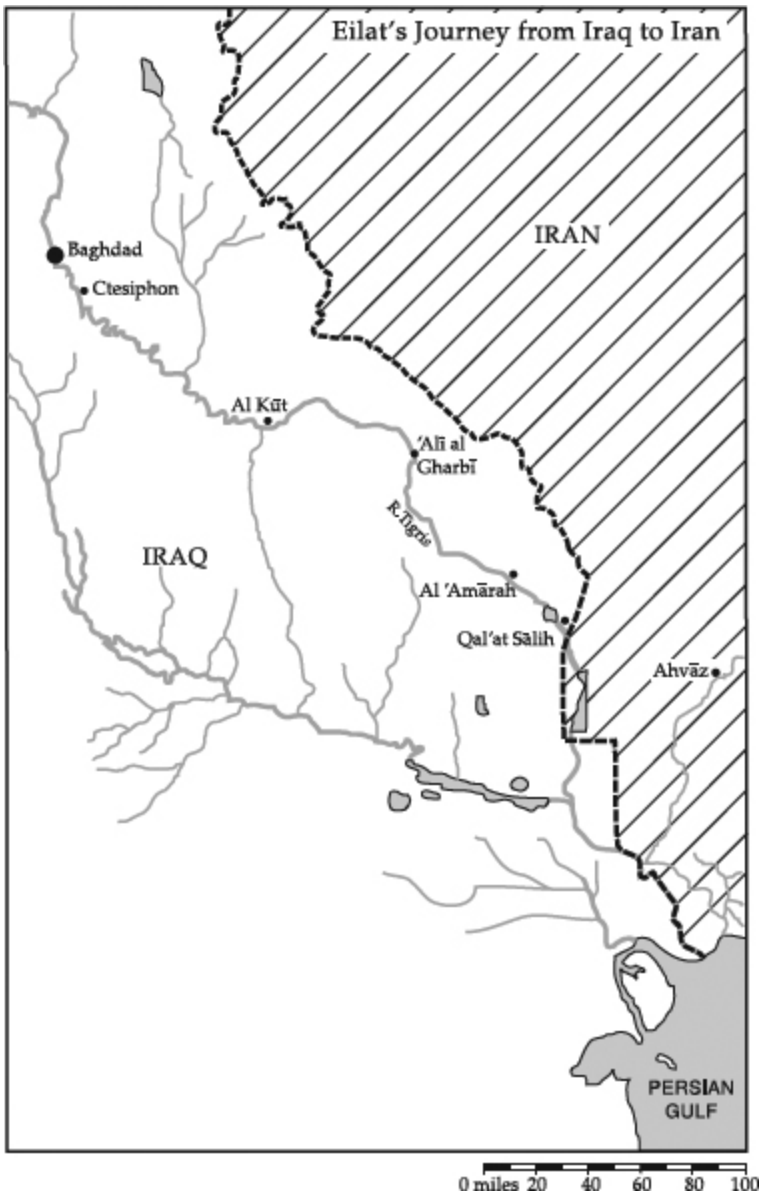
The petrified palace guard nodded firmly. Eilat left him and stepped out into the courtyard, where he pulled a battered old bicycle away from the wall where it had stood in the shadows. Swiftly he took off his suit, shirt, tie and shoes. From a cloth bag behind the bicycle he produced old, soiled Arab robes, a turban and thonged leather shoes, and put them on. He stuffed his Western clothes into the sack in their place and slung it over his shoulder. Then, adopting the stooped posture of an elderly man, he pushed the bike out through the gate and made his way, limping painfully, away from Al-Jamouri Street toward the alley's far end.

For over a year now he'd rented a disgustingly dirty little garret on the top floor of a small block of apartments less than 50 yards from his house on the same tiny street. It took him only moments to get there, leave the bicycle in the

downstairs hall and climb the three flights of stairs. Once inside his room he shaved his beard, leaving just a thick black mustache. As he did so he prepared his mind for the new persona he was going to adopt, that of a street pedlar plying his wares among Rashid's copper and gold bazaars. He would lead this new life for at least the next month, during which time the President's security men would place an iron grip on every airport, seaport, bus and rail terminal in the country, while they tried to run down Iraq's most wanted intelligence officer. The one with three passports.

'If they searched this land for a thousand years,' mused Eilat as he cleaned his razor, 'I don't suppose they'd ever, ever look for me along the street from which I vanished – my last known position.'

A month had gone by. For the past four days Baghdad had simmered in flaming June temperatures of around 110 degrees. The nights had brought no real respite, not even a cooling breeze off the eastern edges of the Syrian Desert. There had been terrible dust storms out in the central plains all week, the winds were hot, and Baghdad's four million people were wilting under the hammer of the sun.



Nonetheless, Eilat had to go.

He waited until 10pm on the night of June 26 and then gathered up his heavy cloth sack and cleared his room. He collected his bicycle from its usual place in the downstairs hall. The heat hit him like a blast from a furnace as he shambled out into the dark alley. As he had remarked to the man whose life he had so scrupulously spared a month before, he was leaving and might not be back for some time.

Eilat was fit but he was currently, by deliberate design, overweight: during the past month he had gained 14 pounds by following a careful diet of chicken, lamb, rice and pita bread at least twice a day. By the time he reached Al–Jamouri Street he was already sweating heavily. Once on the wide thoroughfare he mounted the old bike and set off slowly in a southeasterly direction, heading for the great bend where the Tigris swings suddenly west around the university before turning east again in a nine-mile loop out on the southern edge of the city. He pedaled gently, making for the long sweep of the Dora Expressway at the point where it crosses the river. The city was darker and quieter down here along Sadoun Street, and there were few people walking in Fateh Square. Eilat kept going until he could make out the huge yawning overpass of the expressway near where it becomes a truly spectacular bridge.

Here he dismounted and turned off the public roads, pushing the bike through the dark until he came into the deeper shadow of the bridge. He dumped the bike under a clump of bushes and began to move on foot along the banks of the Tigris. This was the great river of his boyhood, and he was aware this might be his last walk beside its quietly flowing brown waters.

It would be a long journey downstream, all 225 miles of it. He had the route laid out in detail, but without a single name penciled in, on a hand-drawn map he carried in the pocket of his robe. It was a critical drawing to him, but he had done it so it would be complete gibberish to anyone else. He also carried with him a tiny military compass he had owned for many years. He intended to proceed at the speed of Napoleon’s army on its way to Moscow – four miles an hour, despite full packs and muskets. If he could find shade, he would sleep by day and walk through the night, which was at least a little cooler – albeit not much. As he proceeded south toward the marsh the humidity would become stifling, and he guessed he would lose weight

progressively. If there was no shade to be had by day he would keep walking beneath the glare of the desert sun.

Eilat was a Bedouin by birth, and he possessed the proud Bedouin belief that his kind alone could survive in the pitiless summer climate of his homeland, that he could go without food for days if he had to, and that he was not intimidated by even the worst dust storm. Water he carried with him, but he would not require as much of that as another man would.

He wished, not for the first time, that he still had access to one of his father's camels. If he closed his eyes he could easily imagine the tireless, swaying rhythm of the stride, the endless beat of the wide hooves on the desert floor. But that was all in the far-lost youth he had spent out on the rim of the central plains, a long way north up the river, when life had been simple and he had been a true son of Iraq.

Iraq – the country which had used him for years, often under circumstances of unthinkable danger, and which had now betrayed him in the most brutal possible way. Eilat inwardly seethed at the injustice of the treatment handed out to him by the President. He had seen the coldness in the man's eyes when he had presented the Medal of Honor, and he still failed to understand why he should have been singled out for summary execution after all that he had done in the cause of his nation's greatness. In the past they had paid him, and paid him well. He still had close to a million dollars on deposit in four banks around the world, and he had some cash with him too, dinars and rials. But the thought kept returning: the President had not just rejected him but had wished him dead. And now, in the space of just one month, he, Eilat One, had redirected all of the hatred in his soul, the hatred that had sustained him through the loneliest years, toward a new enemy.

In the Arabian mind, the great flagstaff of pride stands tall. In the Bedouin mind it is unbending. The biblical concept of revenge is universal in Iraq, accepted by all.

Time is no barrier – there is no time. In a land which has survived for six millennia, a single year is only a heartbeat, a decade just an interval. Eilat would have his revenge. Of that he was certain. He had spent his life in the service of his country, never marrying, never loving – except once. And the realization of the years wasted, squandered on an unfaithful master, burned into his mind as he walked steadily along the eastern bank of the dark Tigris.

By midnight the moon was bright, and it lit his way. Out to his left he could see car headlights in the distance, on the main road which connects Baghdad to the southern port of Basra. If he were to cross the sparse sandy flatlands between the river and the highway he could probably pick up a ride or even a bus, and at the very least the flat terrain of the road and its hard shoulder would be easier to walk upon. But Eilat was a wanted man, on the run in his own country, and he did not wish to be seen up close – not by anyone. He assumed the army and the police would have descriptions of him and that he would by now be branded a murderer and an enemy of the state. Which was, he had decided, a bit depressing . . . but considerably better than being dead.

He smiled when he imagined how long and determinedly they must have searched for a smartly dressed, bearded businessman, in Western clothes, and heading abroad. The chances of anyone connecting such a man with this scruffy country Arab, walking south with his pedlar's sack and the stooped gait of an old man, were, he knew, remote. But Eilat was not into 'remote'; he operated only on cold-blooded near-certainty. If no one saw him, he could not be recognized. And so he continued through the hot night, moving over the sands as swiftly as he could, if not so fast as Napoleon's army.

The sun came throbbing up into the eastern sky shortly before 6am. In the distance Eilat could see the ancient remains of the Parthian city of Ctesiphon, which lies on the

banks of the river 20 miles south of Baghdad. He could just make out in the dawn light the great vaulted arch, built in the second century BC, which still dominates the ruins. Eilat still had 45 minutes more to walk. He took his first drink of the new day, swallowing almost a pint of water; if need be he could refill his two leather flasks somewhere in the old city.

By 8am the sun was high and the temperature was on its way to 110 degrees. He had found the city's only café deserted of customers, and now he sat alone in a corner facing the wall, devouring a large breakfast of eggs, toast and chicken with rice. He drank orange juice and coffee, and paid the staff to fill his water-holders. The price was minimal compared to what he would have paid in Baghdad.

The next stretch of the river, winding 100 miles down to Al Kūt, was not a walk which held any appeal to Eilat. The flat landscape, hammered brown by the sun, was practically bereft of life, human, animal or plant. He knew that close to the water he would occasionally pass scattered date-palms tended by kind and generous rural families who would perhaps offer him a drink, and they would want to talk. But he would have nothing to say to them. The President had made him an outcast in his own land, and he already felt foreign, as if he must hide all of his inner thoughts even from simple country people, people for whom he had once been prepared to die.

Perhaps that had been inevitable anyway, because he had spent so many years away the men in power felt he could never be completely trusted. He could understand that thought process – just. But the blind injustice of it represented to Eilat a violation of his honor. And *that* was what he found himself unable to live with.

He left the café before 10am and wandered out to the ruined outskirts of Ctesiphon, avoiding people, searching for a quiet, sheltered north-facing place to sleep until the late

afternoon, when he would eat and drink again before setting off on his second night's trek. He found a small, low dusty building – just three stone sides and a roof – which faced back up the river, the way he had come. It was hot inside, but the shade was deep. Eilat was exhausted, and breakfast had made him sleepy. But first he turned toward the back wall, on a bearing of two-zero-five, a line down which, more than 800 miles distant, lay the holy Muslim city of Mecca. He knelt in the dust and humbled himself, seeking the forgiveness of his God.

Eilat slept for eight hours undisturbed, his head on his soft water bags, his right hand on the handle of the desert knife beneath his robe. By 8pm he was under way again, striding forward along the river, wishing it ran a straighter course, hoping not to meet anyone, cursing the ground upon which the President of Iraq walked.

Eilat once more wondered what the future held for him. He had a plan, but it might not work. For the first time in his entire life he faced the world alone – entirely alone. The cord which had joined him for so long to Iraq was severed, and it could never be repaired.

He walked generally southeast with the river for almost four days, alone and, so far as he knew, unobserved. He spoke to no one, and eked out his water and his pita bread. The sun was pitiless during the day, and shade was so sparse that his planned schedule went awry almost immediately; he just slept when he could and walked the rest of the time, making on average 25 miles a day without incident except that he lost some ten pounds body-weight.

On the first day of July, late in the afternoon, six miles north of the riverside town of Al Kūt, he spotted, about 200 yards ahead of him, his first potential problem. There on the edge of a small grove of date-palms was a camouflaged Iraqi army jeep. He could see no sign of local farmers, there was no house, and the area seemed completely desolate aside from two uniformed soldiers leaning against the

vehicle. It was too late to stop or turn off the path. They must have seen him and, despite the comforting protection of his Arab robe, complete now with the customary redcheckered head-dress, Eilat knew they might very well ask to see his identification documents.

Walking with the aid of a long stick he had cut, he slowed slightly as he made his approach, limping, stooping forward. He did not avert his gaze as he continued straight toward the jeep and the soldiers, each of whom carried a short-barreled machine-gun, probably old-design Russian.

He was almost level when the senior man spoke, brusquely, with authority. ‘Hey, old man. Iraqi?’

Eilat nodded and kept going, moving past them, exaggerating the limp. He thought for a split second that they would ignore him, but then the soldier spoke again. ‘WAIT!’

Eilat was not surprised. He was moving into a particularly sensitive area of the country. Al Kūt is the town where the Tigris splits, and here a great drainage program had been instituted to dry out the marshes and destroy the wild wetland homes of the ancient and potentially troublesome Marsh Arabs. Eilat knew the place was crawling with soldiers: it was still regarded as somewhat out of control – drier, but out of control.

He obeyed the command of the Iraqi officer, turning slowly and saying softly the traditional greeting of the desert: *‘Salam aleikom* Peace be upon you.

The officer was a man of about 35, tall and thin with a hooked beak of a nose, hooded dark eyes, and a full mouth. He did not smile. ‘Documents?’

‘I have none, sir,’ replied Eilat. ‘I’m just a poor traveler.’

‘Traveling to where?’

‘I’m looking for my son, sir. I heard from him last in An-Nasiriya three years ago. I have no money except for a few dinars, enough for some bread in Kūt.’