

120 HORAS

(120 Hours)

a *thriller* by
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English version - Chapters 1 and 2

People tend to forget that misfortune doesn't knock politely at the door before breaking into their lives and turning their world upside down. And once things start to go bad, they generally snowball right over anyone who happens to be in their path.

And that's exactly what happened in the controversial and enigmatic year of 1998. Ordinary men and women were suddenly cast into a whirlpool of unusual and murky events which, cloaked in a mantle of silence and perplexity, overshadowed a small corner of the world that was already accustomed to the strain and horror of battle.

In 1998, the Middle East was in flames, dilacerated by the ever-growing arms race and by an insane lust for power. In 1998, the Lebanon — while trying to recover from the effects of fifteen long years of civil war — was suffering under the influence and dominium of its powerful and implacable neighbor: Syria. In 1998, the alarming growth rate in illegal arms deals was matched only by that of corruption and family disintegration. In 1998, a sordid conspiracy was being nurtured in the entrails of a society — duped by a false sense of vigor and normality — that was heading for a dramatic and cataclysmic climax.

The months went by and the year came to an end, becoming just one more turned page of the calendar. Events well knew to respect the official barriers, never daring to transcend them. The secret was maintained: no whispers slipped through to cause suspicion. Leaks could cause grave consequences: everybody would suffer, and nobody would benefit.

Everybody was satisfied... except for one man: one Brazilian, for whom the compromise had the bitter taste of gall. His melancholic and despairing eyes had witnessed the whole story. And, long after the events, on a radiant morning beneath the clear blue skies of Rio de Janeiro, battered by his festering anguish, he knew he couldn't remain silent any longer. He gathered his most trusted friends and, over various pots of coffee, told the story as he had seen it. Fate had made him a participant, and marked him for the rest of his mortal life.

Horatio would never be able to forget those fateful months in early 1998. The world thought that everything was in order. He thought that he knew the ways of the world. Both were dead wrong.

CHAPTER 1

Something more than lunch was waiting for the Brazilian engineer that early afternoon.

It was the second Tuesday in February, 1998. A winter's day like so many others in Damascus: lowering gray clouds, the constant cold wind and incessant traffic scattering noise and pollution all over the city. At just after 1 p.m. Aurelio Marcondes Amorim, a fifty-three year old engineer, came out of the imposing doorway to his apartment building facing the Jahez park in Malki, one of the more prosperous areas of the city and home to most of the ministries and foreign embassies. Impeccable in a graphite-gray suit, he solemnly descended the set of four steps carrying his inseparable black briefcase. Over his other arm, he had draped a made-to-measure trench coat, as a precaution against a sudden rain shower.

Spying Imad, his driver, slumped lazily against the hood of the Citroen Xantia parked at the curb, Aurelio peremptorily snapped his fingers and gestured for him to open the rear door. Moments later, the car had circuited the monumental Omayyad Square and was swallowed up in the hectic traffic along Choukry Koutwatly Avenue, the main artery of the Syrian capital. Bordered by gardens, luxury hotels, museums and the grandiose pavilion of the International Trade Fair, this was one of the most impressive avenues in the Middle East, on a par with the Sadoun, in Baghdad, the Vali-Asr, in Tehran, and the stupendous Omar Bin al-Khattab, in Dubai. For just a moment, Aurelio's fingers curled around the smooth leather of his briefcase and a sharp pain short across his stiff shoulders. He was feeling the strain.

The trip between his apartment building and the Palais des Nobles restaurant in the International Trade Fair, just across from the Méridien Hotel, took no more than ten minutes. Aurelio climbed out of the car, the wind playing with his thinning hair, amateurishly dyed a dark brown color. With careful steps, he made his way towards the opulently porticoed entrance that greeted the well-heeled customers. This was a luxury restaurant. The sumptuous decoration, reminiscent of a style encountered in certain mid-European eighteenth century palaces, was amplified by enormous wall mirrors

and gracious alfrescos on the ceiling, producing an excessively Faustian air, capable of offending diners with more conservative aesthetic taste. Aurelio always got the cold tingles when he came into the vast dining hall, with its glass domed ceiling and walls hidden behind potted plants and caged exotic birds, all contrived to create a discomfiting tropical atmosphere.

Ushered by the Maitre D', he made his way to the corner table set up for two, where a light-skinned, well-dressed man tabled his drink and rose to shake Aurelio's hand. Although only in his late thirties, Ugo Pietrangeli looked a number of years older.

As they shook hands, Aurelio greeted his host in Arabic:

"*Kéf hálak?* (How are you?)"

"*Bikhér, al-hámdu lilláh* (Well, thank God)", Ugo replied, before changing to English:

"Have a seat."

Aurelio settled himself in the chair as Ugo also sat down and pointed at the menu lying on the table:

"Why don't we start with a Syrian *mezze?*"

Aurelio just nodded in response and Ugo made the order. Instead of the usual Arrack and iced water, he asked for a bottle of Bordeaux to wash it down. As the waiter left, he turned to Aurelio:

"Did you bring the diskette?"

"Right in here", Aurelio smiled in reply, lightly tapping his briefcase.

The waiter arrived to serve the wine, but Ugo took the bottle from his hands and sent him away. As he carefully poured a measure of the dark red liquid into Aurelio's glass, Ugo nodded and then looked into his guest's eyes:

"You did the right thing, my friend. I was afraid we were going to have a problem. You know that I have very little to say about policy. I just do as I'm told."

He smiled, as he half-filled his own glass and placed the bottle in its stand.

"My principal suspected that you may be having second thoughts about our relationship. I'm afraid he feels that you are no longer completely trustworthy."

Aurelio took an appreciative sip of his wine. He had understood the threat in Ugo's words, but he shrugged it off. He opened his briefcase and took out a small plastic case, handing it over to Ugo. The Italian opened the case and extracted a standard 100 MB diskette, identified by a handwritten

label as *Tanechka* — the Russian diminutive for Tatyana — followed by a number of Roman numerals.

Ugo turned the diskette over in his hand, slowly nodding his head.

He looked up and stared Aurelio in the eye:

"I do hope you didn't copy these documents, my friend?"

Aurelio quickly shook his head:

"Of course not!"

"I only ask because there has been a certain delay."

Aurelio maintained eye contact, but remained silent.

"You were well aware that my organization attached a certain urgency to receiving this information," Ugo went on, his voice now devoid of any warmth. "Your tardiness was, at the very least, inconsiderate." Ugo's voice turned to steel. "In our business world, we must be very careful of stepping on the wrong toes, Aurelio. There are some suspicious souls who are very quick to respond to the slightest perceived provocation... and my principal is one of those souls."

Aurelio seemed struck speechless. Nothing in his previous dealings with Ugo had prepared him for this assault. He picked up his glass and emptied it in one quick gulp, wiping his mouth, and then his forehead, with the linen napkin.

"I think I've said enough," Ugo concluded, "although I have been instructed to tell you that should you stray, in the slightest way, from our agreement, we will know, and you, and your family, will suffer the direst consequences. I do hope you understand, my friend. If you do hold copies of these documents, I strongly recommend that you erase them as soon as possible."

Having somewhat recovered, Aurelio managed to insert some bravado into his reply: "Save your threats, Ugo. I have respected, and intend to continue respecting, the terms of our agreement. I know that I'm running a little behind our schedule and I realize that this could make you tense, so I can't blame you for your remarks. But you really have nothing to worry about, and there's no reason for making veiled threats."

Ugo just shook his head:

"You fool. It doesn't matter a damn what I think! Don't you understand that we — you and I — are nothing more than tiny cogs in the wheel, easily crushed if we are even slightly out of line. I wasn't threatening you, man... I was just reminding you of the way things are."

Aurelio had been able to control himself reasonably well, but Ugo's last words struck right at his pride:

"That's bullshit, Ugo! You'd like nothing more than to see me go down! You were looking at me like a sadistic judge handing down a death sentence; an executioner at the block, his mouth watering in anticipation as his tortured victim staggers up the steps. I'm not a jackal! If I wanted you out, I wouldn't stab you in the back; it would be face-to-face, and damn the consequences. But this is all irrelevant, Ugo: of course, neither of us is out to get the other: we're in this together after all... and I'm going to see it through to the end."

Aurelio knew that he was stretching the facts, but he also knew that his best defense was to attack. He had, in fact, been dragging his feet for weeks, making up one excuse after another to delay handing over the diskette. He had needed just a little more time to put the final touches to a plan that had begun to take shape more than a year ago. It was during a delicious dinner at the golden beach resort of Jounieh, soothed by the sea breezes on the Lebanese coast, that he had made his first, and fatal, decision. The initial excitement with his new post in Syria, the enthusiasm he had felt as his plane touched down four long years ago, had soured into an exasperating and permanent sense of frustration and confinement, exacerbated by his innate, rebellious — and, at times, anarchic — nature, totally unsuited to the bureaucratic life.

He had used the assassination of a sweet European scientist in Moscow as an excuse to hold Ugo off until he'd worked out the last details of his escape plan. Now it was in the hands of God: barring some quirk of fate, he'd soon be far away, just another face in the crowd, counting his loot and laughing at Ugo, his goons, and at his principal, the Don.

Aurelio checked his watch and decided that it was time to leave. Ugo's gross and suspicious attitude had turned what he'd hoped would be a pleasant farewell lunch into a thoroughly disagreeable experience. A pity, but... As Aurelio refolded his napkin and got to his feet, Ugo gave him an ugly grin:

"Leaving already? But I thought we were going to have lunch..."

"You have what you came for, Ugo. And I was under the impression that your principal was anxious to receive the diskette? Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you to pay for the meal. It's the least you can do, after all your threats and insults."

Ugo laughed in his face:

"My dear Aurelio, what you took as threats and insults were nothing more than good advice and straight speaking from an old friend. Now have a good trip home, and be careful with the traffic. It can be a killer at this hour of the day."

In reply, Aurelio flung his napkin to the table, snatched up his briefcase and strode from the salon. As he exited the restaurant, he saw Imad standing by the already open rear door of the car. He sat back in the leather seat and, as soon as the driver was behind the wheel, barked out:

"Let's get out of here... and step on it!"

As the car pulled away from the curb, Aurelio leaned back into the headrest and took a succession of deep breaths. As his anger cooled, he was assailed by doubt. How could he pit his few years experience of the Middle East against the organization Ugo represented, and still come out ahead? He had made his plans with great care, gone over them a million times, and created backups and alternatives to cover all possible scenarios, but doubt and uncertainty still ate away at his self-confidence. The Don undoubtedly had connections with all the myriad terrorist groups: his tentacles knew no national boundaries. Aurelio went over his plans one more time and his confidence grew as the doubt diminished. He was so close: just a few more minor details and he'd be able to disappear. He started to smile as his imagination leapfrogged the difficulties and imponderables of the next couple of days and took him to his paradisiacal hideaway on an isolated stretch of the Northeastern Brazilian coast.

His smile faded as he felt his heartbeat accelerate. He paled as he noted the trembling in his hands. His breathing became ragged. As a distraction from the anxiety attack, Aurelio opened his briefcase and started shuffling through the meaningless paperwork he carried as a prop, but the effects were minimal. He glanced out the window and noticed that, instead of taking the normal route home, the Citroen was heading in the opposite direction: they were at the top of Bagdad Boulevard, coming up to the al-Firdûss mosque and the roundabout that would take them North, towards Homs and Aleppo.

His need for air overcoming his irritation with Imad, Aurelio lowered the window and tried to gulp down deep breaths of the chilly draft, but his anxiety rocketed. He couldn't breathe and his heart was thumping against his breastbone. His eyes started to bulge as he ripped off his tie. Imad glanced at the rearview mirror and watched his passenger buck and contort on the back seat. He heard Aurelio gasp out:

"Help me, Imad. The bastards poisoned me... Ugo and his cursed Don..."

Imad kept his eyes on the road, a slow smile forming around his mouth. Aurelio was now bowed on the back seat:

"It was a setup! The bastards had me set up right from the beginning!"

Aurelio rasped the words out one by one. With a final spasm, he bit through his tongue, shuddered and slumped back on the seat. Imad adjusted the rearview mirror and studied his former boss. Apart from the ashen face and the trickle of blood that seeped from the corner of his mouth, Aurelio could have been sleeping off a heavy lunch. Under his bushy, black moustache, Imad's smile turned into a wide grin. He accelerated out of the roundabout and, a few moments later, cleared the outskirts of Damascus.

As Imad slowed just before coming to Homs, the car was waved down by a roadside fruit vendor. Imad lowered his window to examine the merchandise: a small wooden crate filled with ripe, succulent peaches.

"They have just been picked, *sayid*," the vendor claimed, stealing a glance at Aurelio, slumped down in the back seat. When he looked back at Imad, his eyes were filled with a cold look of satisfaction and his head nodded in approval.

"No, thank you. I am not fond of peaches," Imad replied in a calm voice.

The vendor smiled ingratiatingly and insisted:

"Perhaps you should accept them anyway. It would surely please our masters."

Imad returned the smile and slowly nodded his head. He pulled three hundred Syrian Pound notes from his pocket and handed them through the window to the vendor. Accepting the fruit with one hand, he placed the crate on the passenger seat beside him, closed the window and drove off with a farewell wave to the vendor.

As he continued North, he glanced back at Aurelio's moribund form draped over the back seat, pulled out a cell phone and pressed a speed dial button. When he informed his party that the peaches had been accepted, he received the terse order to dump them.

* * *

Ugo Pietrangeli closed his cell phone with the gratifying feeling of a job well done. Aurelio was beginning to represent an unacceptable risk, and his elimination had become inevitable. Ugo's only regret was that he'd had to spoil a perfectly good bottle of wine by spiking it with a fatal dose of concentrated nicotine extract. It was a good Bordeaux, and it troubled the Italian that he had wasted a superb vintage on a despicable little worm like Aurelio Amorim. Despite being a popular meeting place for foreign businessmen and the Syrian Nouveaux Riches, the Palais des Nobles, with its decoration lying somewhere

between opulence and Kitsch, was Ugo's favorite hangout in Damascus. It provided the perfect refuge from the gray, unfriendly atmosphere of the Syrian capital, a city that he — an Italian resident of Lebanon — thoroughly abhorred.

Ugo paid his bill and left the restaurant. He strolled along the tree-lined boulevard, mingling with couples out for a walk with their kids, old men deep in conversation, veiled women and the occasional girl wearing jeans or woolen skirts, their long hair blowing in the cold wind. The shops were starting to raise their shutters, reopening after their habitual hour-long after lunch break. He walked up Choukry Koutwatly Avenue as far as the National Museum and then flagged down a cab to take him to the airport.

In the departure terminal, he went to a locker and retrieved the briefcase he'd left there just after arriving that morning. He deposited the diskette safely in the briefcase and twirled the tumblers on the lock. An hour later, he caught his short flight to Beirut. The Don would be pleased with his good news.

Ugo carefully placed his briefcase in the baggage compartment above his seat and strapped himself in. He smiled as he imagined how his fellow passengers would react if they knew what was on the diskette sharing the cabin with them, and, particularly, when they worked out the effect it would have on their sorry little lives.

What would they do if they knew that his shiny little disk, in the hands of the Don's pet scientists and engineers, would become a hydrogen bomb — one of the most potent nuclear devices known to man —, to be sold to the highest bidder.

Ugo's smile turned into a satisfied, if slightly diabolic, grin.

CHAPTER 2

RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, 35 DAYS LATER

With a happy grin splitting his face from ear to ear, Gabriel Karam sat back and just let the sheer beauty of the late summer landscape wash over him. He gazed out the window of the luxury air-conditioned tour bus as it left Copacabana and sped along the highway that cut through the greenery of the beachside park of Flamengo on its way to the maze of downtown. The sun glared down out of an immaculate blue sky, in counterpoint to the torrential rains that had swept the city only twenty-four hours previously. These downpours, that are common occurrences during the summer months, tie up the whole city, cause the citizens innumerable problems, and temporarily turn the current mayor into public enemy number one.

Gabriel had arrived in a rain-swept Rio the previous afternoon, off a flight from Beirut, Lebanon, where he currently lived. Born in Rio, Gabriel had never cut the ties to his native city and had lost count of the number of times he had been irresistibly drawn back to Brazil over the thirty-odd years since he had first gone to live in Lebanon. Gabriel loved Rio. In his opinion, the Marvelous City was one of the few places in the world capable of accommodating, in reasonable harmony, so many people with the most varied temperaments and lifestyles. He was convinced that the main reason this was possible was to be found in the city's multiple vocations, ranging from its plethora of natural beauty spots to the cultural effervescence that made it the center of Brazilian creativity and art, a rebellious and critical urban cauldron for forming, and deforming, opinions, where Brazil was held up to the mirror and continuously tested, forced to think and to innovate.

The bus pulled up to the curb in front of the old Ministry of Finance building and Gabriel alighted, walking off down Rua Araújo Porto Alegre towards the National Museum of Fine Arts. Because of his slight limp — a sequela left over from a bout with bone tuberculosis during childhood, that had spread to the backbone and kept him in bed for almost a year — he had some problems in crossing Rua México because of the bumper-to-bumper

traffic. He became irritated by the roar of the engines and the incessant honking of car horns when the packed cars made him leave the pedestrian crossing and weave between the bumpers. The patches of scalp showing through his thinning gray hair burned under the exuberant and pitiless tropical summer sun, which seemed to be draining the strength from his body at the same rate as it uplifted his spirits. As he came into the shade of the entrance to the museum, Gabriel didn't bother to try to hide his relief at escaping the torrid oven of Avenida Rio Branco.

He slowly climbed the marble steps to the second floor cafeteria, where he met his old friends, Horácio and Silva, placidly sitting at a table under one of the massive skylights. As soon as he saw Gabriel, Horácio leapt to his feet and enfolded him in a heartfelt bear hug.

"You old buzzard," he greeted Gabriel, with tears in his eyes, "it's great to see you again."

"And you, Horácio!" Gabriel held him off at arms length: "Just look at you, boy. You're the picture of health!"

Silvia, much more discrete, greeted him with a timid handshake and a kiss on either cheek. They all sat down again and ordered three large cups of milky coffee.

Gabriel looked around him appreciatively. "This museum is one of the major jewels in the crown of Rio," Gabriel pronounced, betraying an almost imperceptible accent, somewhere between Arab and French, the fruit of his many years in Lebanon. "It's an oasis in the center of Rio."

The waitress appeared with their coffees.

"It sure is that, Gabriel," Horácio laughed as he sugared his coffee. "And it's going to get better. In a couple of day's time, they're going to open a Salvador Dali exhibition. The third floor is completely closed off. They're working 24 hours a day, getting ready to receive the works directly from Catalonia."

They sipped contentedly at their coffee. Horácio was a big man, easily carrying his fifty-six years. A heavy gray beard covered his rosy face, and his thick glasses were right out of the seventies. He was the perfect Santa Claus, with a ready smile, a bubbling laugh and expansive gestures. His major conflict seemed to be with the bathroom scales. A renowned fan of good cooking, Silvia and his doctor were involved in a constant battle to keep him away from heavy food, and to ensure that he paid at least lip service to a diet and exercise regime... both of which he hated with a vengeance. Despite being a man of refined tastes, etiquette was not one of his strong suits. Something of a wine

connoisseur and a minor authority on classical music, Jazz and early Brazilian pop, he was an avid reader of novels, poetry and art books, from which he shamelessly stole story lines, exotica and florid phrases to be regurgitated at the literary gatherings and soirées he loved to frequent.

Silvia was three years younger than her ebullient husband, and a lot more slender. Her normally serene and delicate face was framed by fine brown hair, always meticulously kept in place. Her low voice and modest gestures contrasted frontally with her husband's robust, and often blustering, posture, which, at times, seemed to cause her some discomposure. Despite their apparent differences, they seldom quarreled, and never seriously: all the more surprising, since they spent most of their time together. For a number of years, their architectural and interior design office in Ipanema had produced projects for the elite of Rio society. Their work was a regular feature in the specialist and trade magazines, and they were a constant presence at all the trade fairs and social events held in the major capitals throughout Brazil.

Silvia sipped her coffee and then casually asked Gabriel:

"I'm curious to know why you've suddenly turned up now, at the end of the summer. You always come in September... And we spoke on the phone not more than three weeks ago, and you didn't say anything about this trip."

Gabriel just shrugged and smiled.

"I just missed the old country, and had to come back. To tell you the truth, I didn't plan a thing. I just got on the plane and here I am..."

Horácio checked his watch and broke in:

"It's already twelve thirty, so drink up your coffee. You know how packed the restaurants become during the lunch hour." He noticed the sweat on Gabriel's forehead and chuckled, as though he was reading his friend's mind. "I know how hot it is out there, but the restaurant is just around the corner." Anticipating Gabriel's objection, he chuckled again, adding: "Forget the taxi, Gabriel. We'll walk and work up an appetite."

Gabriel smiled back and raised his hands in defeat. Silvia finished her coffee and got up, the men following her lead. Horácio took a jacket from the back of his chair and started to put it on. Gabriel looked at him and shook his head.

"People are frying eggs on the street, and you still can't leave you jacket at home! How can you stand the heat?"

Horácio gave his friend a condescending smile.

"A man's jacket reflects his soul, Gabriel. You should take to using one, without paying heed to the trends of fashion or fickle weather. Thank God, I

am immune to temperatures below, or up to, that of my own body heat. Frankly, I think that people who complain about ambient temperatures below 40°C suffer from some sort of emotional problem."

Gabriel loved to listen to Horácio's off-the-cuff behavioral theories.

"People have claimed that, without a jacket, I feel naked. And that is simply untrue," Horácio went on. "Without a jacket, I am stripped of my very skin!"

"Now you're going too far, Horácio," Silvia chided, screwing up her face in mock disgust.

"Horácio, you are the greatest philosopher on the face of the earth," Gabriel mocked, reaching down to drink the last of his coffee. "Your theory on jackets should be chiseled in granite."

"Nonsense," Horácio replied, starting to laugh. "My only philosophy is the fruit of a sweaty coupling between the drawing board and a good bottle of red wine!"

As Gabriel chuckled at the response, Horácio went on to talk about his current projects and to discourse on the fierce competition between interior decorators. The architect complained that, with the current rise in the standard of living, every Tom, Dick and Harry contracted an interior designer to redecorate his sorry, little apartment, and that kids just out of architectural school were cutting prices down to the bone. He then started on the good-old-days theme... His deep voice soared from word to word, and Gabriel smiled affectionately. He was swamped by an immense wave of good feelings. It was always great to be back in Rio, and especially so when he was with this incredible couple. Horácio's cultured and, at the same time, simple prose had the magical gift of making him feel completely at home. These two were his family.

Fifty-two years ago, Gabriel Botelho Karam, the only son of a Lebanese father and Brazilian mother, was born in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Scion of a prosperous family of bankers and businessmen, he never hid his scant interest in the family business, to the great despair of his father, Farid Karam. The old man had always dreamed of placing his boy's hand firmly on the tiller of the *Banque Transméditerranée de l'Orient Arabe* — or, more simply, the Transmediterranean Bank — a solid family-owned financial institution, founded in the fifties by Gabriel's grandfather. Even though he had never been involved in running the bank, Gabriel would end up inheriting it. Gabriel's passion had always been reserved for the imaginative and instigating universe

of art: as far back as he could remember, his passion had been so intense that he was blind to any other option in life. It was as though Fate had condemned him to total dedication to this passion, encouraging him along a road filled with obstacles, in a world contaminated by rules and prejudice. It wasn't easy for Gabriel to stand up to the veiled disdain of his social peers, who just couldn't envisage why anyone would turn down an auspicious future at the command of a solid business, so that they could try to become an artist — then considered a vocation for lunatics or, at the very least, people of doubtful character.

However, all the pressure was quite useless. Gabriel just didn't have any choice in the matter. Art had used its sharpened claws to drag him from the arid and oppressive captivity of contemporary society, and release him into a sun and oxygen filled world where he could plunge deep into his very being and fly on the wings of his imagination. The doors of reflection were flung wide open: he was freed of the yoke of the system, and finally stripped of prejudice and snap judgment. From that moment on, Gabriel's art transcended the planes of imagination and contemplation to acquire the features of a superior being, capable of attaining a state of permanent reflection, of communion with the infinite, of comprehension of the human soul and mind, of God Himself. This gave the young artist an inexhaustible source of motivation and a healthy unease with the contemporary world, with its History and with its version of the meaning of Man. This became his universe, and regardless of how his family — in their love — conspired to annihilate it, his internal urges spoke out louder. To this day, the memory of his healthy rebellion was a source of burning pride.

Just before his twenty-second birthday, his father died precociously of inoperable cancer. Accompanied by his mother, *Gilda Góes Botelho*, Gabriel left the family home in Botafogo and went to live with his paternal grandfather in Beirut. He was awarded a degree in History by the University of Saint-Joseph and, a year later, met *Solange Rubeiz*, one year his junior. They got married four years later.

Their fairy tale marriage lasted more than a decade, and produced a fine son, whom they baptized *Michel*. *Solange* and *Gabriel* shared the same preferences and had similar temperaments, so that, at times, it seemed they could read each others thoughts. It was a very busy period in *Gabriel's* life. He traveled frequently to confer with intellectuals and academics and to participate in congresses and international conferences on matters that ranged from archeology to philately. He also furthered his studies of ancient languages, becoming quite fluent in *Greek*, *Latin*, *Hebrew* and *Aramaic*. This

ability was put to good use in his research projects among fragile manuscripts and archaic documents deposited in specialist sections of museums and libraries throughout the world. The years of study led him to publish three books on the history of art, one of which was a long and boring guide to Gothic art. The guide contained so many obvious and dispensable personal impressions that it ended up more of a travel diary than an academic tome. And, as he later admitted with a wry grin, neither of the other books was exceptional in any way.

And then, in the summer of 1987, at the peak of his youthful career, Gabriel's life was struck by tragedy. It was early in the week and a fragile ceasefire reigned in the burnt-out, devastated streets of Beirut, castigated by the chaos and violence of a civil war that had broken out in 1975 and would only come to an exhausted end three years later, in 1990. As Solange was driving Michel home from school under the smoke filled sky, she turned right into Sursok Street. Three blocks from the National Museum, a parked Mercedes-Benz went up in a violent explosion, just as Solange was passing by. She and Michel were killed instantly. The car bomb had been placed in the green line area, a wide no-man's land that cut a swathe through the center of the once prosperous capital. The command of the Shiite militia, which controlled West Beirut at the time, claimed authorship of the attack. The intended target had been the leader of a Maronite faction, which supported the President, Amin Gemayel. However, his route had been strategically changed just before the bomb went off.

The shock and trauma of the loss of his wife and eleven year old son plunged Gabriel into deep depression. For the next few years, he led the bitter life of a recluse, avoiding all social contact and losing all interest in the world. His recovery was slow and faltering, undoubtedly aided by the support of a psychiatrist who called in to see him twice a week over the roughest period.

Now, more than ten years later, standing in the cafeteria under the museum skylights, Gabriel felt a wave of emotion as he realized that he had changed. He had finally done what would have seemed impossible ten years before: he had put his family's loss to rest, and could now get on with his life. Looking at Horácio and Silvia, whom he held as close as brother and sister, he weighed up his life and came to the conclusion that, despite the tragedy he had suffered, life had been good. Of course, he couldn't yet factor in the troubles that were looming just over the horizon.

Horácio paid for their coffees and linking his arm with Silvia's ushered Gabriel towards the exit. It was a quarter to one when they came out of the museum and started to walk towards the restaurant. They took a shortcut under the mezzanine of the modernist palace that had housed the Ministry of Education, passed in front of the two hundred year old church of Santa Luzia and finally came to the building occupied by the French Consulate. One of Horácio's favorite restaurants: Le Champs Elysées, was up on the twelfth floor.

Settled at a window table, with a fine view of Sugarloaf Mountain and Guanabara Bay, they ordered escallops of grouper with rocket and rosemary butter, to be washed down with a bottle of Sauternes Eschenauer.

As soon as the waiter left to get their order, Horácio pulled out his cell phone and punched in a rapid sequence of numbers. Gabriel watched as Horácio waited in vain for a reply. Horácio's easy-going manner seemed to dissolve as the phone continued to ring, apparently unanswered. Tension lines appeared on his brow, and his ruddy cheeks seemed to emphasize dark shadows under the eyes, which Gabriel hadn't noticed until now. Horácio closed his phone as soon as the food arrived. He put the device away and, in an apparent effort to put the episode behind him, took hold of his wine glass.

"I propose a toast," he said, and raised the glass towards Silvia. "To our dearest friend, Gabriel, and a most enjoyable visit."

Gabriel glanced at Silvia, but she just raised her glass, the ghost of an embarrassed smile on her lips. Despite Silvia's greater self-control, Gabriel could see that she shared her husband's unease. He knew both of them well enough to sense that something was going on. This feeling was reinforced when he noticed that Horácio just picked at the grouper, one of his favorite dishes.

"I hope I'm not out of line, Horácio," Gabriel said hesitantly. "But is there anything I can do to help?"

Horácio rolled his eyes.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"It's just that you seem troubled..."

Horácio smiled and shook his head.

"Do I indeed? Well I didn't sleep too well last night." He slowly nodded his head. "I am a little tired."

Again, Gabriel glanced at Silvia, but her whole attention seemed to be fixed on her meal, so he decided to let it go. They finished their main dish and asked for the dessert trolley. While Silvia and Gabriel discussed the merits of the fruit and confections, Horácio — who had a notorious sweet tooth —

ignored them and again took the phone from his pocket. Once again, his call went unanswered and he snapped the cell phone shut.

Gabriel couldn't hold himself back.

"What is going on, Horácio?"

"It's nothing! I told you... nothing at all," he retorted. "It's just a minor business matter."

Silvia caught Gabriel's eye and surreptitiously shook her head. Her eyes seemed blank and sad, and confirmed what Gabriel already knew: something was going on, and they were seriously worried. But he also knew that, if they needed his help, they would tell him in their own good time.

* * *

Horácio took the window seat for the air-conditioned bus ride back to Copacabana. Seemingly lost in thought, he ignored the scenery throughout the whole trip. Gabriel glanced at his profile from time to time, bravely fighting back an urge to bring the matter up one last time.

However, his fertile mind wouldn't give him peace, and he found himself trying to imagine what the problem could be. Maybe it really was just a business matter. Maybe Horácio had a problem with one of his projects? Suppliers often failed to deliver on the agreed date, and it certainly wasn't impossible for one of his contractors to be behind schedule. But that wouldn't explain the extent of Horácio's worry. The man had been in the business a long time, and he was used to dealing with problem clients and truculent builders. He certainly wouldn't lose sleep over a matter like that. Gabriel also ruled out physical malaise: otherwise, they would just have called off lunch and come home directly from the museum.

Gabriel was still trying out various scenarios when the bus dropped them off at the corner of Barata Ribeiro and Xavier da Silveira, and he gladly accepted Horácio's invitation to come up for coffee. His friends lived in the penthouse to an imposing but sober building, designed along classical lines, located right beside the traditional Mallet Soares College. As he always did on his trips to Rio, Gabriel was staying in the small apartment he maintained for that very purpose. Simply furnished, the apartment caught the sea breeze and looked down on bustling Avenida Atlântica. More importantly, it was only a five minute walk from Horácio and Silvia's place.

As they entered the apartment, Horácio peeled off his jacket and headed straight for his office to check the answering machine, leaving Silvia

and Gabriel to make the coffee. Ten minutes later he joined them in the lounge, where they sipped their coffee, enjoying the breeze let in by the wide open French windows and watching the afternoon sunlight redden as it moved up the wall.

As dusk fell, Horácio's eyes slowly closed and he nodded off to sleep. But it still took another fifteen minutes before Gabriel gathered up the courage to begin his interrogation of Silvia.

"It really is nothing, Gabriel. We're both just a little tired," she sighed, her gaze fixed on the buildings across the street.

Gabriel just shrugged.

"Whatever you say. If you don't want to tell me what's the matter, there's not much I can do."

He watched as Silvia nibbled on her lower lip, before shifting her gaze to her husband, deep in slumber. When she finally turned to Gabriel, he could see the first tears glistening on her cheeks. He held her gaze while the tears turned into heart-rending sobs, and kept his silence until they also subsided.

"I don't know if I should tell you," she finally managed to say. "As you suspect, we do have a problem, but I don't know if we have the right to get you involved."

Gabriel waited for her to go on.

"I've been trying to act as though nothing was the matter for Horácio's sake," Silvia told him, her voice coming under control. "If he knew how worried I really am, I don't know what it would do to him." She took a couple of deep breaths, trying to put her thoughts in order. "We haven't had any word from Horácio's brother in almost five weeks. He left Brazil over seven years ago and, in all that time, he phones us three times a week, as regular as clockwork. So, obviously, we're worried about him. Something has happened and we have no way of finding out what. It's getting so that we can't sleep at night. Horácio has lost his appetite. When we have to leave the house — like today to have lunch with you — he calls here every ten minutes to check on the answering machine. It's like that every day. We don't know where to turn."

Gabriel was astounded.

"But don't you have his number? Or even an address where you could trace him?"

"He left his old apartment and wouldn't give us a new number. He said that he was working on a top-secret project for the Government and that he'd be incommunicado for a while, but that he'd maintain contact from his end. Of

course Horácio insisted that we'd need some kind of contact number, but it was no use, Aurelio wouldn't budge."

A pensive look came over Gabriel's face:

"I think I remember him. We met once, in this very apartment, on one of my trips to Rio, just after we met." After a beat, he asked: "What was his name again?"

"Aurelio Amorim."

"And where was he living?"

"Our last address was in Rome. But he could be anywhere by now."

Silvia was right: Aurelio could be anywhere, and his insistence on secrecy indicated that he could also be involved in anything, and not necessarily in licit business ventures, whether for the Government, or for private enterprise. Gabriel felt a shiver of apprehension and tried to put that thought out of his mind. He turned his eyes from Silvia to Horácio and felt an enormous feeling of pity and commiseration for his old friend. He had seemed so strong and confident, and now he looked so beaten.

Back in his apartment on Copacabana beach, Gabriel spent a sleepless night. For a long time he stood in front of his window, gazing out at the halogen lights that illuminated the wide expanse of sandy beach. He watched the full moon follow its silver path down to the horizon and breathed in the breeze that came with the appearance of dawn's red clouds on that same horizon. During his lifetime, he had come across various cases similar to that of Aurelio, and he did his best to convince himself that this was an honorable exception.