

## An Absence of Light

### Chapter 1

#### Sunday, The First Day

He walked barefoot in the dark across the clipped, dampish lawn, the muggy breeze from the Gulf of Mexico fifty yards away gently tugging at the legs of his silk pajamas which he had rolled to mid calf. He was shirtless and though his torso carried its weight a little differently now than it had a couple of decades earlier, at fifty-eight his muscles were still firm. He was a handsome man and he knew it, and every day he lifted weights to maintain a thick chest and spent half an hour in the coastal sun to keep a nut brown patina to his olive complexion. Because his hair was beginning to thin a little, he now wore it slightly longer than he used to, his gray sideburns brushed back rakishly to blend with the gray hair at his temples.

Carrying a tall, thin glass of ice and rum in one hand, he walked toward the pier that jutted out into the murky Gulf where a seaplane was whipping the night waters as it taxied toward the docking slip, its red and white lights winking, the dying whine of its props dropping to lower and lower registers as it approached the two men on the pier who were waiting to secure the craft to the pilings.

Panos Kalatis could not see any of this very clearly, the men, the plane, the pier were all gray upon darker gray upon black, for the night was moonless and clear and the scattered lights on the long sweep of the

shoreline cast their illumination straight to the stars where it was swallowed in the vast, empty, universal darkness. He scratched the salt-and-pepper hair on his chest and waited, listening to the peculiar hollow sound that things made when echoing off the surface of water, the doors of the plane clicking open, the metal pontoons thumping softly against the pilings, water lapping against shore and pier, the shuffle of men's feet on the wooden dock, and the furtive sound of their voices.

Kalatis ate a piece of ice from his glass and waited. He loved the Gulf, its breath-warm nights filled with the salty odors of other worlds brought along on the swift, strong currents of the Gulf Stream. It reminded him of other salty waters, other gulfs, other shores, and intrigues.

At the moment, however, his overriding emotion was restlessness. He stepped a few feet away nearer the point where the pier joined the breakwater below. In the almost total darkness he could see the cusp of sand below the pier and make out the vague movements of the men on the dock. From among the scuffling sounds of feet on the dock he could make out a single set with a rhythm all its own. He concentrated on those as they separated from the others and grew louder as they approached along the pier. When they reached the stairs they turned short and choppy as the man mounted the series of steps that brought him up to the edge of the lawn.

"Panos."

"Over here." He spoke from the dark, not too loud, knowing his thick voice carried like a foghorn.

"Nice craft," the man said, a little out of breath, coming toward Kalatis across the lawn.

Before he got to him, Kalatis walked a few paces back toward the house so that Colin Faerber had to keep walking to overtake him. When Kalatis stopped he turned to face Faerber and ate another piece of ice. They looked at each other, each face barely discernible in the low light. Kalatis said nothing, and after a moment he turned and looked back toward the house, which was on higher ground, palm trees scattered around it, a low-slung structure with deep verandas that made one think of British Colonial settings. Kalatis could see Jael on the veranda, moving back and forth, her long-limbed silhouette drifting in the dusky half light coming from the tall

windows behind her. Even from this distance he clearly could see that she was naked. When he turned around he just caught the movement of Faeber's head looking away down the beach, as though there were something that way he wanted to see, out there in the dark.

Faeber was wearing a suit with a pocket handkerchief. He must have been somewhere, a party maybe, some kind of event. Kalatis could just make out the expression on his face in the wan light from the windows of the house, a light that died all the way across the broad sloping lawn to the beach until it was hardly anything at all by the time it got to them standing just a few yards above the water.

Faeber was feeling awkward because of Kalatis's silence. He looked down the beach the other way, and then he looked around to the plane on the water. There was nowhere else to direct his eyes except at Kalatis, or at Jael on the veranda where he already had looked and was afraid to look again.

Kalatis watched him and waited a moment more so that Faeber would be absolutely grateful to hear him speak. He drank some rum looking out toward the dark ghost of the plane on the water.

"I received a telephone call about an hour ago," he said. "It was not good news."

He could see Faeber stiffen, and he thought that if he were a dog he would have been able to smell the fear riding on the gusts coming off the water from behind him.

"What's the matter?" Faeber asked.

"Arthur Tisler has killed himself." He pronounced the name Tee-sler.

Pause. "God . . .!" The ejaculation from Faeber was an aspirant, a hiss.

Kalatis thought he saw Faeber's left leg move, maybe to steady himself on the slope of the lawn.

"Wh . . . when was this? Christ . . . that's incredible. Jesus Christ. When was this?"

"A few hours ago."

"Goddamn . . . Arthur Tisler."

"Yes."

"Was he alone? I mean, someone found him I guess. Who found him?"

"That's irrelevant."

Faeber was silent. Kalatis did not interrupt him. Years of experience had taught him that good people—and Faeber was a good man—responded to very little stimulus. If they were intelligent enough, venal enough, and if he had brought them along with enough skill and just the right tincture of anxiety, they would make the right decisions. They would be dependable—for his purposes, at least—even when they were caught off balance.

Faeber had turned to look down the beach, at the curving line of lights, as though he could do his best thinking if he were not looking directly in Kalatis's face. Kalatis studied his profile. He was a typical American businessman, a kind of perennial, overgrown boy who always would be impressed by—and who always would try to impress others with—his odd sense of masculinity, a concept that was comprised in large part of financial competitiveness. Kalatis had never met an American businessman who didn't eventually try to puzzle out your approximate financial worth by circuitous conversation during which they tried to elicit your occupation, where you lived, what you drove, what clubs you belonged to, whom you knew, where you went on vacation, and what kind of toys you employed for your leisure—boat, car, skis, guns, et cetera. It was a kind of penis comparison, a sophomoric measuring of oneself against the next man, using dollars instead of genitals.

Faeber turned to Kalatis. "You said you got a call. Is this going to be on the news?"

"No. I understand this can be handled very quietly. They've had some luck on that."

Faeber didn't pursue the question further or ask Kalatis to elaborate. He didn't need to. He loosened his tie.

"Then I guess the Seldon operation is dead in its tracks," he said. He paused and shook his head. "Suicide. Goddamn, can you believe that? What a butt stupid thing to do. Unbelievable. Okay, uh, there'll be a flurry of departmental investigations. Homicide and IAD. Graver will conduct an inquiry of his own to make sure nothing was compromised. If it's suicide . . . " He stopped and focused on Kalatis. "They're sure it's suicide . . .?"

Kalatis nodded. "They are saying suicide."

"Then since it's suicide there's no problem with Homicide or IAD, only Graver's inquiry. But we should be covered there. Our people are good, very careful. I'll keep an eye on it, make sure nothing's unraveling."

Kalatis drank the remaining rum and tossed the ice out into the grass.

"I'm sure you will keep everything under control, Faeber," Kalatis said. "But two things bother me about what is happening here," he said. "Very serious concerns. It has been my experience that a suicide in this business always means trouble. I have seen it before. Mexico City. Brindisi. Montevideo. Marsala. Tel Aviv. Marseille." He named them slowly, hesitating a beat or two between each as though he first had to visualize the incident in each city before he could speak the name. "In each of these places I saw suicides, and in every instance they caused confusion, unexpected reversals. Other people died. Trouble."

He paused and rolled the cold glass across his bare chest, wiping the chilled sweat from the glass onto his skin. He wanted Faeber to listen to his words, to think about what he was saying.

"Men like this," he said, "do not kill themselves for ordinary reasons like money trouble or women or depression. They kill themselves, often, out of fear. Because they believe they cannot escape something. Or, perhaps, because they have done something they know will guarantee that they will have to be killed and, for some reason that I have never understood, they want to cheat the assassin."

"Maybe," Faeber said. "But this isn't the Third World, for Christ's sake. It's not the same here, Panos."

Kalatis nodded indulgently at the American chauvinism, an assumed superiority so deeply ingrained in this man that he wouldn't even have understood the sense of it if you had stopped him and explained it to him. A gust from the water tugged at the baggy legs of his pajamas.

"No, this is not the Third World, my friend," Kalatis assented. His voice was patient, his manner polite. "But what you don't understand yet is that you are no longer in the First World either. Or the Second. When you got involved in this work, Faeber, you got yourself into a different world altogether. I tried to tell you this, remember? This world is the same all

over the globe. Believe me. You will not survive if you do not grasp that completely . . . and quickly."

Faeber looked at Kalatis and in the pale glow coming from across his shoulder from the house above them Kalatis could see the other man's eyes shift ever so slightly away from him as he looked at the woman on the veranda beyond. Kalatis smiled to himself. He had been waiting for that. Men, even intelligent men, perhaps especially intelligent men, were such predictable animals. There were very few who could have kept their eyes off that veranda. He had known men who, even when they knew they were about to die in the next few moments, would have had to look at that veranda.

With a blink Faeber quickly brought his eyes back to Kalatis, but the Greek had looked down toward the dock so that Faeber would not detect that he had been caught stealing a look at Jael.

"You said there were two things that bothered you," Faeber said.

"Graver."

"Oh?"

"I have taken the time to study him in a little more depth than what was provided in the dossier you gave me," Kalatis said. "You know, he could be an easy man to underestimate. This is a serious thing, for him to conduct an inquiry. He will not be so easy to deceive."

"No," Faeber agreed. "I think you're right there, but we've got a bit of luck on our side—in the timing here. These are not good times for Graver. He's had distractions lately."

"You mean because of his wife."

"That's right. Your wife runs off with a society doctor it tends to break your concentration."

"That's not quite accurate."

"Okay, she had a long affair with the doctor, and now she's left Graver to marry the guy. The thing is, this doctor's a gadfly, this has been in the gossip columns for Christ's sake. Graver's a very private kind of man. It's got to be driving him nuts."

"Yes," Kalatis said. "I can imagine how he must feel."

Down on the docks a man laughed softly, and feet shifted on the planks. Kalatis had spent many nights listening to waiting men talk. They

smoked; they talked softly about everything from sex to death; they waited for signals; they waited for something to make their adrenaline squirt and shock them to life. When Kalatis was young he was one of those men, but now he was the one they waited for. Men had waited in the darkness for him all over the world, and he had learned that the feel of night was different everywhere, different in Trieste than in Prague, different in Lima than in Lisbon, different in New Orleans than Milan. But the darkness, well, the darkness was always the same.

"Then is there something specific you think I should do?" Faeber asked.

"No." Kalatis dug his toes into the moist grass. "I only recommend that you second-guess yourself every time your heart beats. You know what must happen and what must not happen." There was a pause, but Faeber said nothing. "Okay," Kalatis said.

He whistled once sharply, and the murmuring voices stopped. Suddenly there was the sound of hurried footsteps on the pier, something bumped against the metal pontoons of the plane, and then the engine coughed and caught.

"They will take you back to Clear Lake and then drive you into the city."

Faeber seemed suddenly uncertain, hesitant to leave as though he thought he had missed something, some instruction, something more specific. Kalatis only looked at him in silence knowing that with the pale light coming from Kalatis's back Faeber could see little more of his features than his silhouette.

After an awkward moment, Faeber turned away and headed down the slope to the pier. Kalatis watched him and then when the darkness had covered him he listened to his choppy footsteps descending the stairs, his stride changing as he got to the dock and headed toward the plane.

Kalatis sucked his lungs full of the smell of the Gulf of Mexico and shrugged his shoulders forward to stretch his back muscles. He waited there on the sloping lawn while the moorings were untied from the plane and its engines slowly revved and whipped the water as it pulled away from the dock. Moving out into the Gulf, it picked up speed and then the pilot bore down on the throttle and the engines whined and beat the night

air and in a moment it was airborne, climbing into the spangled black, its receding lights eventually becoming indistinguishable from the stars. He lost sight of it and even lost the sound of it as the surf reclaimed its rhythm on the night.

He turned around and looked toward the house. Jael was lying on her stomach in the hammock, and he could see it swinging, swinging. The cotton webbing of the hammock was white, and he imagined her dark skin against it and the way it protruded softly through the weave of the pattern in cocoa triangles.

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