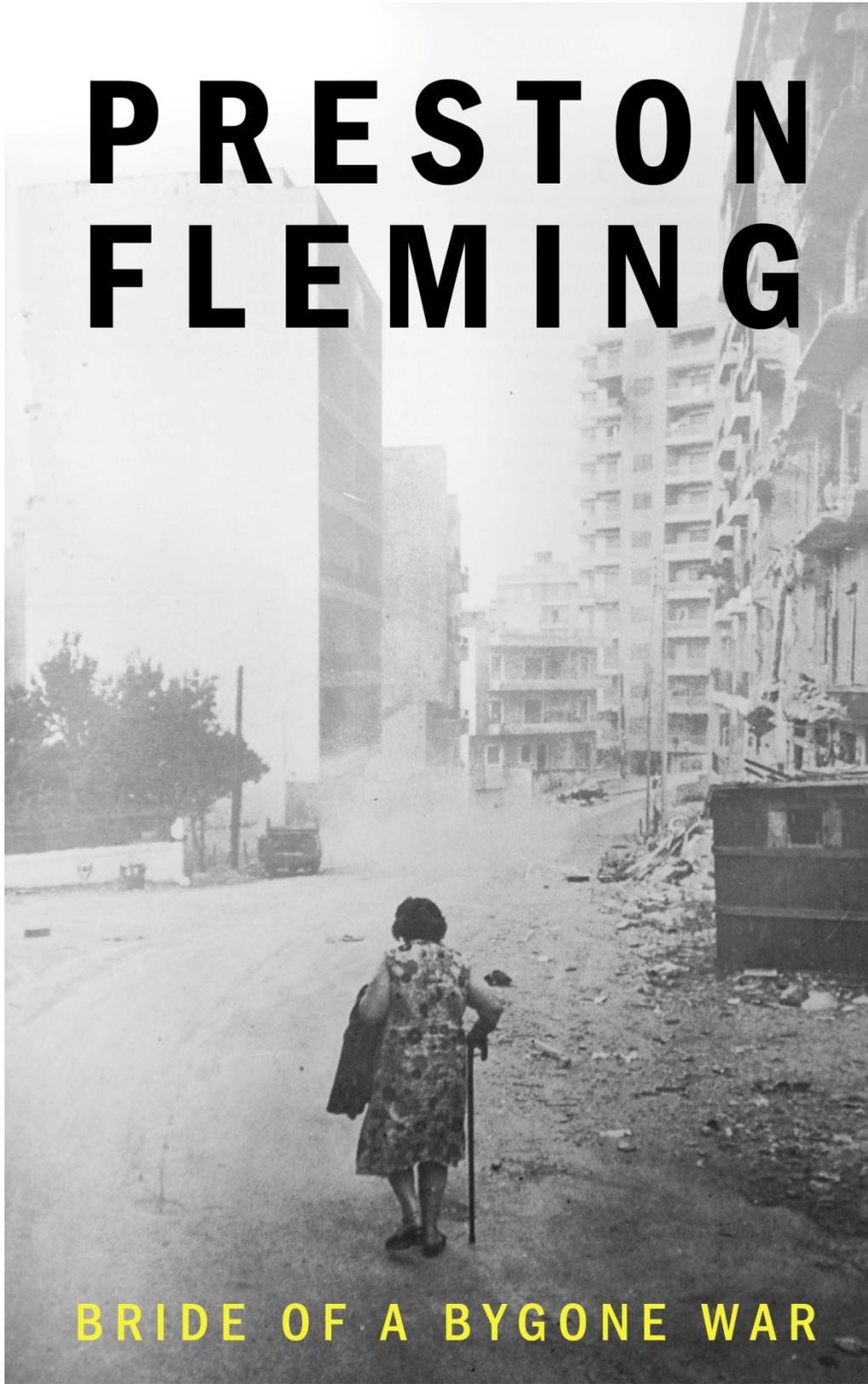


PRESTON FLEMING

BRIDE OF A BYGONE WAR



BRIDE OF A BYGONE WAR

A NOVEL

PRESTON FLEMING

PF PUBLISHING, BOSTON

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PART I

Chapter 1

Conrad Prosser picked out the pale yellow point of light just above the horizon to the left of the rising crescent moon. He leaned forward, all of his attention concentrated upon the light, until his nose pressed against the windshield and clouded the glass. "It's coming. I see it. There, at two o'clock."

"The hell it is," Bud Strickland replied. "That's Venus. It's too bright for an aircraft. Besides, it ain't moving."

"Of course it's moving. I saw it do a little dip a minute ago. Then it drifted a bit from left to right."

"That's just an optical illusion," Strickland insisted, his Tennessee drawl dragging out the long vowel of the last word. "Anything in the distance will seem to move if you stare at it long enough. Face it, old fella. It's twenty minutes past sundown, and the flight is an hour and a half late. Our man ain't coming."

"He'll be here. Amman is less than an hour away, for heaven's sake. They'd send out a spare plane from Beirut if it came to that. The Lebanese need the money too badly to cancel a flight."

Strickland gave a knowing shake of the head. "Emile says the airport won't handle passenger flights after dark anymore. The only night flights that arrive these days are cargo flights. What do you say we check one more time at the arrivals counter and call it a night?"

"In a minute, Bud, in a minute. First, let's watch this baby land. Something tells me it's the one we're waiting for."

"There's a fifty-Leb note in my back pocket says the damned thing isn't man-made."

"Double it and you're on." Prosser held out his hand, which was large and square and attached to a thickly muscled wrist.

Strickland gave it a perfunctory shake and then returned to twisting the dial of the AM car radio. Like all embassy vehicles, the American-made station wagon was a rock-bottom, no-frills model, and the radio was anything but high-fidelity. Strickland twirled

the dial until at last he found a clean signal and then snorted loudly in disgust. It was the evening news, in Arabic.

“Can you understand all that mumbo-jumbo?” Strickland asked.

Prosser laughed. “The U.S. government kept me on full salary for nearly two years to learn that mumbo-jumbo. What you’re hearing now is the Voice of Palestine, covering Chairman Arafat’s return from his meetings with his brotherly Arab leaders in North Africa. According to the report, he delivered an important—scratch that, historic—communiqué on behalf of the revolutionary leadership concerning the need for solidarity and steadfastness in the face of the Zionist and Imperialist enemies. There’s more, but I wouldn’t want to spoil it for you in case you planned to read about it in the morning papers.”

Strickland flipped the dial again but found nothing but news: four broadcasts in Arabic and one in French. He switched off the radio and lit up a Marlboro, far and away the number one brand on both sides of the Green Line.

“You do know what he looks like, don’t you?” Strickland asked absently, gazing through the windshield at what he was sure was the second planet.

“Lukash?” Prosser answered after a long pause. “I’ll recognize him all right. My first week in Jeddah, I did the jerk a favor and nearly lost my job over it.”

Strickland raised an eyebrow. “What did you give him, the cipher tapes?”

“A passport, slightly used. One of Lukash’s agents had to leave the kingdom in a hurry and asked him to help get the man’s girlfriend out. Since I worked mornings at the visa counter, Lukash asked me if I could dig one up for her to use.”

Strickland let out a low whistle.

“No, it wasn’t an American passport,” Prosser said. “I’m not that big a fool. I found him a nice little Italian job, complete with Saudi exit visa and a freshly minted U.S. tourist visa. The year of birth, physical ID, and photo were all quite close to what he needed. I heard later that his gal made it past Saudi and Italian passport controls without anyone giving her a second look. So I held up my end of the bargain.”

“Then why the flap?”

“The next day, when I tried to reach Lukash and couldn’t, I was dumb enough to ask the deputy chief whether Lukash’s exfiltration arrived safely in Rome. It never occurred to me that Lukash hadn’t cleared the operation with the front office. For a while it looked like we were going to have to brief the ambassador and have U.S. Immigration put the passport on their watch list. In the end it didn’t come to that, thank God. The chief of station managed to sweep the whole affair under the rug.”

Strickland’s eyes betrayed his disbelief.

Prosser sighed. “The thing was, this particular woman could have raised an enormous stink for us if the Saudis had pulled her in. Enough to get half the station kicked out of the kingdom. I think Lukash honestly believed he was doing the right thing in getting her out of country fast, even if it meant not waiting for approvals. But both of us still got letters of reprimand for it.”

“Hell, Con, seems to me you got off easy. If one of our techs did something like that, he’d be processed out of the Agency within twenty-four hours. What were you planning to do if the real passport holder showed up? Tell her the dog ate it?”

“Oh, she showed up all right,” Prosser answered with a dreamy, distant look, as if he were reliving the incident in his mind. “The signora presented her numbered chit at the desk, and our Pakistani file clerk gave her his typical runaround, bless his soul. I kept my distance until he had time to wear her down a bit. When she finally demanded to see an American, I stepped forward with a song and dance about her passport being accidentally shredded with the classified trash. Of course, I apologized profusely and promised to intervene with the Italian embassy to get her a new passport and with the Saudi interior ministry to get her a new exit visa. And after some wailing and moaning, she accepted the offer.

“But the consul wasn’t as easily convinced. He never challenged me on it, but from then on, he kept all the unclaimed foreign passports in the four-drawer safe in his office. Jack had an uncanny instinct for spotting bullshit. Even mine. I imagine it comes from all those years of being lied to by visa applicants.”

“Not to mention several generations of junior intel officers under consular cover,” Strickland added.

“I beg your pardon,” Prosser protested. “Didn’t they teach you right from wrong at the Farm? There’s nothing wrong with lying for your country. It does you good. Ask anyone at Headquarters.”

“Jesus Christ, the damned thing has grown,” Strickland interrupted, his gaze fixed on a yellowish disc to the left of the moon.

Prosser saw it, too, and broke into a self-satisfied grin. “What did I tell you, Bud? Middle East Airlines 434 on its final approach from Amman.”

Strickland pulled out his wallet and slapped a hundred-lira note onto the dashboard with a sulking grunt.

Prosser stuffed the note into his trouser pocket and let his thoughts move on to other things. In a few minutes he would be responsible for conveying Walter Lukash safely to the American embassy. As it happened, Lukash’s arrival had occupied his thoughts for most of the day. Nearly two years after the passport episode, he still resented Lukash for having taken unfair advantage of his inexperience. He had hardly known the man when the favor had been asked, yet Lukash had been able to persuade him to suspend his natural caution and good judgment. Such talent for inspiring the confidence of mere acquaintances doubtless accounted for Lukash’s unusual success at recruiting agents. In Delhi, Jeddah, and Amman, Lukash was said to have recruited a slew of them, all solid reporters.

“You stay here,” Prosser said. “I’ll meet our man at the gate and walk him through customs. The ambassador wants to see him the moment we get in.”

“You may need this.” Strickland held out a thin, wallet-like airport pass, backed with forest-green kidskin, embossed with the Lebanese interior ministry’s seal. Inside, Strickland’s name was carefully inscribed by hand in Arabic and French, and his photo was fastened at diagonal corners with two brass grommets to prevent substitutions.

“No, you keep it,” Prosser replied. “Just in case you have to come in to get me. This one is all I’ll need.”

He pulled his diplomatic identity card from the inside breast pocket of his suit. It had an identical green leather backing with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs seal that seemed all but indistinguishable from the Ministry of the Interior seal on Strickland’s pass.

The yellowish light remained suspended like a parachute flare over the Mediterranean, and then it slowly divided into two distinct landing lights as the aircraft began its final descent. Prosser and Strickland remained inside the station wagon, watching the twin beams alternately hover and drift back down to earth.

After a few minutes Strickland broke the silence. “Does Lukash know you’re the one sent to meet him?”

“I don’t see how he could. But what’s the difference? The passport episode is ancient history. Lukash has a short memory; he only cares about what’s happening to himself today—here and now. If ever there was a guy who never looks back, it’s him.”

* * *

Twenty-five minutes later Strickland was still twisting the radio dial in search of a language he understood. A handful of Lebanese passengers with luggage had begun to trickle out of the arrivals gate, but the bulk of the passengers aboard MEA 434—if indeed that was the flight—were still awaiting clearance from passport control and customs.

Strickland gave another glance at the terminal and saw a tall, broad-shouldered foreigner of about thirty-five step over the curb surrounding the diplomatic parking zone. The stranger wore a black turtleneck under a camel’s hair jacket, and his closely cropped black hair was brushed back in a style favored lately in Frankfurt and Berlin. The stranger stopped a good three or four meters from the station wagon and dropped an expensive-looking leather carry-on and matching garment bag onto the pavement.

“American embassy?” he inquired with a confident smile that presumed the outcome. “Not that anyone else would drive a full-sized Chevy wagon in a country with a chronic gasoline shortage.”

Strickland stepped out and offered the newcomer his hand. “Bud Strickland. Good to see you. Tell me, were you really on the flight from Amman?”

Lukash smiled. It was a forthright, all-American-boy kind of smile that made Strickland think of sandlot baseball, teamwork, and fair play. But at the same time, Lukash’s broken nose and the inch-long scar above his right eye left the impression that he preferred contact sports—ice hockey, or maybe lacrosse or rugby. There was something about those unblinking gray eyes that confirmed that impression: something

withheld, hidden, and cold at the core. Strickland imagined he could see why Prosser had come to resent the man.

“Here, let me put those in the back for you,” Strickland offered affably, unlocking the tailgate. “Where’s the rest of your gear?”

Lukash shrugged. “That’s it. I thought I’d pick up a new outfit or two on Hamra Street. The rest of my stuff is on its way back to the States.”

“Two carry-ons? That’s all?”

“Hell, it’s only a two-month gig.”

Strickland hesitated. “I wouldn’t count the days just yet if I were you.”

“Well, okay, two to three months, depending on how long it takes Headquarters to find my replacement.”

“Shucks, Walt,” Strickland chuckled. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, old pal, but they’ve already found your replacement. It’s you.”

The newcomer’s jaws clenched and his lips drew back in the hint of a snarl, but before Strickland could react, Lukash let out a deep breath and his eyes took on an expression akin to resignation. “That would be just like Headquarters, wouldn’t it?”

Strickland was pondering Lukash’s sudden change of expression when he saw Prosser crossing the weed-choked median strip that separated the arrivals terminal from the diplomatic parking zone, where the station wagon was waiting. Even at a distance Strickland could see Prosser’s displeasure that his charge had evaded him.

“Where have you been?” Prosser greeted Lukash irritably, foregoing any greeting or word of welcome. “I waited at the damned gate for twenty minutes. When the last transfer bus arrived without you, I even asked passport control to check the passenger manifest, but they said you’d already passed through. Where the hell were you?”

“Relax, Connie. I made it, didn’t I?” Lukash answered with a conciliatory tone, holding out his hand.

“By the grace of God you did,” Prosser replied, opening the front passenger door of the station wagon. “Don’t you realize this place is crawling with Syrian and Palestinian security? Normally Headquarters never would have let you come in by way of the airport. If they hadn’t been in such a rush to get you here in time to see the division

chief, you'd have had to take the boat from Cyprus. For Christ's sake, Walt, this isn't the Paris of the East anymore. It's Dodge City, and the Dalton Gang is running it."

Lukash held out his hand once again. Prosser hesitated for a fraction of a second and then took it. "Welcome to Beirut, Walt. What's left of it, anyway."

Lukash looked around at the potholed pavement, the scrub-covered median strip, the shattered streetlamps, and then at the scores of broken windowpanes on the second and third stories of the terminal. To the south and west, three-meter-high earthen berms littered the barren landscape as far as the eye could see, each designed to defend a Syrian anti-aircraft battery from attack by Israeli fighter-bombers. Prosser was right. This was not the Beirut he had left five years ago.

"I see you two fellas are already acquainted," Strickland observed drily. "Were you stationed together?"

"Connie and I served together in Jeddah a couple years back," Lukash answered. "We had some tense moments at the airport back then, too, didn't we, Connie?"

Prosser smiled faintly. "Saudi immigration officers are even denser than the Lebanese. When we exfiltrated the woman I was telling you about, Bud, I had to pose as her husband and write out an authorization for her to leave. Under Saudi law, you see, a married woman isn't allowed to leave the country without written permission from her husband. That goes even for wives of foreigners and non-Muslims. God, you should have seen me trying to explain to the Saudis why I looked so different from the photo in the Italian passport I was carrying."

Lukash opened the rear door of the station wagon and climbed in. Prosser and Strickland took their seats in front.

"So tell me your secret, Walt," Prosser inquired. "How did you get through immigration so quickly?"

"Oh, dumb luck, I suppose. I was the only passenger traveling first class, so the senior air hostess offered me a lift to the terminal in the crew's minibus. I went straight to the head of the line reserved for diplomats and air crews and waltzed right through."

"And how did you swing first class?"

“Diplomatic discount. Middle East knocks off fifty percent. But you have to know to ask for it.”

The station wagon reached the end of the access road and turned left onto rue Gamal Abdel Nasser, better known as Airport Road. A hundred meters farther, Strickland brought the wagon to an abrupt halt alongside a shoulder-high sandbag enclosure. A similar structure stood on the opposite shoulder of the road fifty meters ahead. Between the two, a pair of desert-tan armored personnel carriers squatted in opposite directions astride the road, their swivel-mounted heavy machine guns trained on approaching traffic.

A dark-eyed Syrian soldier whose age could have been anything between eighteen and thirty reached out with his left hand for Strickland’s diplomatic identity card while keeping his right on the pistol grip of the Kalashnikov carbine slung over one shoulder. Judging from the Syrian’s red beret and the paratrooper’s wings pinned to his camouflage tunic, Lukash guessed that he belonged to a Special Forces unit. He handed forward his diplomatic passport for Strickland to offer the sentry.

The Syrian returned the card with a smile that revealed two even rows of gleaming white teeth set off against a bushy black mustache. With his enormous dark eyes, long straight nose, and ruddy complexion, the man was handsome enough to make it in the movies, Lukash thought—a young Omar Sharif. But, then, there were so many like him in Beirut—Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, Armenians, Egyptians, Kurds. Nowhere else had he seen such a uniformly high standard of masculine good looks. What a pity the women were not so amply favored. While Lebanese girls were often pretty enough in their teens, they soon ran to fat and by twenty-five rarely merited a second look. It was hardly fair, but, then, Lukash had stopped expecting fairness from life long ago.

The Syrian dismissed Strickland’s offer of the additional two identity cards with a desultory rearward tilt of the head and click of the tongue, a Levantine gesture that meant everything from “no thanks” to “you must be out of your mind.” “*Ahlan wa sahlán. Bienvenue á Liban,*” he said as he waved them through the checkpoint.

“One down, five checkpoints to go,” Strickland commented nervously when the sandbag enclosure was thirty or forty meters behind them.

“The checkpoint industry was still in its infancy when I left here,” Lukash observed. “Mostly straight Muslim-against-Christian stuff. It wasn’t so bad for Westerners then, but you could never be quite sure they wouldn’t just line everybody up against the wall and fire away.”

“You still can’t be sure,” Prosser added with a note of sourness returning to his voice. “By the way, Headquarters warned us about your cover having been compromised to Syrian intelligence awhile back. If the dirtballs had enough sense to watch-list you, they could grab you at one of these checkpoints and have you moved into a Damascus dungeon in the same time it would take Bud and me to drive back to the embassy and fire off a cable to Headquarters. Which, of course, is why Ed sent us to pick you up instead of sending Emile.”

“Well, I do appreciate your taking the trouble,” Lukash added with a tinge of irony. “Once I cross over into East Beirut and settle in with the Phalange, I don’t expect to be seeing this side of town again. Unless, of course, the Lebs suddenly stop feuding and the Syrian army withdraws to the frontier.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Prosser answered.

“I don’t know what route you usually take between the airport and the embassy, but would you mind if we took the coastal road?” Lukash asked. “I’d like to get an idea of the changes since I left five years ago.”

“Sure,” Strickland said. “We’ll be turning left at Airport Circle, and then it will only be a mile or so to the coast. No problem at all.”

They came across another Syrian checkpoint at Airport Circle, but the sentry spotted the diplomatic license plates from a distance and waved them through. All along the way Lukash noticed antiaircraft emplacements dug in behind bulldozed walls of earth and rubble. The place resembled nothing so much as a vast, untidy landfill, complete with the abandoned hulks of wrecked cars and trucks, mounds of discarded tires, and scattered heaps of refuse.

Wherever he looked Lukash could see the aftereffects of warfare: craters in the asphalt road, black-rimmed entry holes the size of softballs in the sides of apartment buildings, and starburst-shaped blast marks where grenades and shells had detonated but failed to penetrate. Yet most of the damaged buildings still seemed to be occupied, whether they had been repaired or not. Where else could people go? Who in his right mind would put capital at risk constructing a new building in a country that was perpetually at war?

“Heads up, guys,” Strickland called out. “We may have some trouble up ahead. Check out the roadblock by the entrance to the Sabra refugee camp. Some cars look like they’ve been ordered to pull over.”

“Let me do the talking,” Prosser replied. “Don’t do anything unless I say so, or unless they hold a gun to your head. Unfortunately, Fatah sentries don’t give a rat’s ass about diplomatic immunity.”

The station wagon took its place behind a half dozen cars queuing at the checkpoint. The sentry post, a crude structure fashioned out of cinder blocks and topped with a corrugated metal roof, sprawled across the full ten-meter width of the median strip, with waist-high walls of sandbags lining both curbs. Only the weed-infested shoulder remained unobstructed.

Twenty or thirty meters ahead, Lukash spotted a couple of boxy Fiat four-door sedans parked well off the shoulder of the road against the high cinder-block wall that surrounded the refugee camp. He watched as a pair of Palestinian militiamen undertook a painstaking search of each vehicle while a third militiaman held the occupants at gunpoint from several paces away.

A helmetless teenager in a green-and-brown-camouflage tunic and mismatched olive drab trousers blocked the Chevy station wagon’s progress twenty meters from the sentry post. Lukash saw in the dim light that the teenager’s hair was dirty and unkempt and that his uniform appeared to be coated with a layer of fine dust. As soon as the vehicle stopped, the boy took Strickland’s proffered diplomatic identity card and stared at it blankly as if unable to read it. Strickland looked past him indifferently, offering no assistance.

“Document—for the others,” the teenage militiaman barked in Arabic. Then he held out his hand.

Lukash guessed that the boy hoped the other men’s identity documents might somehow be easier to read than Strickland’s. At Prosser’s nod, Strickland handed over Prosser’s identity card and Lukash’s diplomatic passport.

While Prosser and Strickland tried to read the facial expressions of the teenage sentry, Lukash watched from the backseat as another pair of sentries waved down a red Alfa Romeo sedan following directly behind the embassy station wagon. The older of the two sentries, who might have been thirty or thirty-five, examined the identity cards of the smart-looking young Arab couple in the Alfa while his younger partner covered them with his rifle.

Suddenly the older sentry’s face exploded with rage. He began screaming at the couple to get out of the car and gestured menacingly with the muzzle of his rifle for them to put their hands up. As soon as they had done so, the older sentry called out to a third militiaman, who leaped past the couple into the driver’s seat and put the Alfa into gear. With a loaded Kalashnikov at their backs and their hands in the air, the couple watched helplessly as their shining new car lurched forward along the shoulder of the road toward the entrance to the refugee camp.

The sports car’s owner, a clean-shaven Arab of about twenty-five in a stylish suede jacket over baggy gray flannel trousers, set off at a run after the Alfa but was tackled from the side and brought down by the militiaman stationed farthest forward. The dazed civilian scrambled to his feet, only to be felled once more when the rifle butt of yet another militiaman slammed squarely between his shoulder blades. As the attacker drew his foot back, intending to deliver a savage kick to the downed man’s ribs, the Alfa owner’s girlfriend seized the attacker’s arm and tried to throw him off balance. She succeeded for an instant before the militiaman knocked her down with a vicious elbow thrust to the side of her head.

When Lukash saw the enraged militiaman raise his foot high over the head of the young Lebanese man, he could stand it no longer. He flung the door open. “Stop! Leave them!” he shouted in Arabic and began to climb out of the car.

He still had one foot inside the station wagon when he felt Prosser grasp his left arm in both hands and yank hard, pulling him off balance and back onto the seat. "Close that door and get back in here!" Prosser hissed. Then, turning toward Strickland, he barked, "Damn it, Bud, step on it!"

Lukash found the asphalt once more with his right foot and twisted his torso violently to break Prosser's grip. He succeeded, but in doing so he lost his balance a second time when the station wagon pitched forward and threw him back into his seat. The door slammed shut by its own weight as the station wagon accelerated away from the roadblock as fast as its sluggish engine would carry it. A moment later the scene of the struggle over the Alfa was already receding from view, with the well-dressed young Arab and his girlfriend left at the mercy of the Palestinians.

"What the hell did you think you were you doing back there?" Prosser demanded angrily as soon as they were out of small-arms range.

"I don't care whose list my name may be on," Lukash answered with cold fury. "I won't pretend to look the other way when someone is being beaten half to death right under my nose."

Lukash knew as soon as he spoke that his statement was not quite true. He had seen men beaten before without intervening. They were never his own prisoners, of course, and it was never in his own country that such things happened. But neither was this. For some reason he could not explain, he had seen it differently this time.

"Of all the goddamned..." Prosser heaved a sigh of exasperation, rolled his eyes, and looked toward Strickland as if for support. The technician's face was ashen, his eyes close to bulging, and his knuckles white from the desperate grip he maintained on the steering wheel. He did not meet Prosser's gaze as he handed over the identity documents the sentry had returned to him.

"In case you've forgotten, Walt, there's still a civil war going on here," Prosser continued. "People do that sort of thing to each other in wars. And if you get in their way, they just might kill you for it."

"Spare me the lecture, Connie. What went on back there had nothing to do with any civil war. It was armed robbery, pure and simple. If we had been able to reach their

commanding officer, we might have made enough of a stink to have shaken that couple loose.”

Prosser was unmoved. “I don’t know what you’ve been smoking down there in Amman, Walt, but if I were you, I’d lay off. And the next time you get the urge to be a hero, do us all a favor and wait till you’re alone.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later the station wagon pulled into the semicircular driveway of the American embassy, a converted apartment building at the eastern end of the Corniche road between the American University of Beirut and the sea. When Lukash had last been inside the building—just short of five years earlier—the Beirut embassy had been the largest American diplomatic mission in the Middle East. Every one of its floors had been in regular use, and a new, larger chancery building was already under construction a mile down the coast in Ramlet al-Baida.

A hundred Americans and more than double as many Lebanese had been on the embassy’s payroll then. Now, fewer than half the embassy’s offices were in use. Two complete floors had been converted to temporary sleeping quarters for these periods—sometimes for weeks at a time—when civil unrest made it unsafe for American diplomats to remain in their apartments overnight. Another floor housed the fifteen-man Marine Security Guard detachment.

Strickland waved to the plainclothes Lebanese guard and parked the station wagon under the porte cochère. The three men entered the embassy lobby in silence and waited for Lukash to present his diplomatic passport to the solemn-faced marine guard in the bulletproof glass enclosure.

After quickly examining the photo and riffling through the back pages, the black marine corporal pressed the buzzer to unlock the inner door and invited the men inside. “Welcome to Beirut, Mr. Lukash,” he added, still expressionless as he handed back the passport.

“I’d say it’s a pleasure to be here, Corporal, only I’m not sure that would be truthful,” Lukash replied as he entered.

The three men stopped before the elevator, a tiny, wood-paneled European model barely large enough for four Americans of average size.

“Better go on up, Walt,” Prosser said. “They’re waiting for you. I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

Lukash entered the elevator alone. At the eighth floor the whirring stopped and the cab made a sharp bounce on the cables. He pushed open the hardwood door and entered a spacious anteroom whose far wall consisted largely of floor-to-ceiling casement windows, at either end of which a glass door opened onto a full-length terrace. Along the remaining three walls, flowered chintz easy chairs and sofas were arranged in conversational clusters. The furniture had nothing in common with the dull, earth-toned, government-issue junk that filled every other American embassy where Lukash had worked.

A matched pair of heavy teak desks squatted side by side, dominating the center of the room. Behind the desk on the right sat a tall, full-figured woman of about forty, round-faced and plain, with limp, dishwater-blond hair streaked with gray. She wore a loose-fitting, long-sleeved cotton print dress of a kind that had become the unofficial uniform of American embassy wives in Jeddah and Riyadh. The loose cut and thin fabric made it as comfortable as the Bedouins’ billowing white *jalabiyyas* in the simmering summer heat, while the long sleeves and ankle-length hemline had the added advantage of not offending traditional Muslim sensibilities.

There hadn’t been many conservative Muslims in Beirut five years ago, Lukash thought—at least none in those days whose sensibilities had to be reckoned with. He wondered whether conservative dress was the product of an Islamic rebirth in post-civil war Beirut or whether the ambassador’s secretary had simply conformed to the wash-and-wear style of so many State Department officials who had spent the better part of their careers in Third World capitals where dry cleaning was not an option.

“Ah, Mr. Lukash,” she began with the condescending smile and omniscient tone of voice of someone who handled every piece of paper that crossed the ambassador’s desk. “It’s so good to have you with us. The ambassador was quite concerned about your safety at the airport. I’ll ring him right now to let him know you’re here.”

She picked up the receiver and punched a red button at the base of the telephone to engage the intercom. “Walter Lukash is here, Mr. Ambassador. Shall I send him in?” She gave Lukash a patronizing smile, as if she had done him a favor for which he should remain forever in her debt. “Yes, Mr. Ambassador. I’ve already phoned the dispatcher. I’ll let you know as soon as your car is ready.” She deposited the receiver gingerly in its cradle, then she looked up at Lukash and blinked twice, as if in surprise that he had not instantly followed her cue to go in.

“Excuse me, but I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name, Miss...”

“Oh, call me Muriel. There’s no point in being formal. We all get to be on close terms rather quickly here. In fact, this embassy is more like a family than any other post I’ve known—and that’s eighteen years in the department speaking. But, then, there’s nothing like a common danger to bring people together. Don’t you think so?”

Lukash smiled amiably, but his eyes held a distant look. As she spoke his thoughts had turned inward, returning to the morning exactly a week before when he had been handed a one-paragraph cable ordering him to proceed at once to Beirut rather than serve out the last two months of his tour of duty in Amman. It had been a back-channel message from the chief of the Near East Division in the Directorate of Operations, who was now on the first leg of his semiannual inspection tour of Middle Eastern stations. The cable offered no specifics except that Lukash’s month of home leave had been canceled and his reassignment to Headquarters as chief of the Palestinian desk was postponed for two months. Lukash was to proceed to Beirut by the fastest available means so that he could meet with the division chief there before the latter’s departure for Damascus on Thursday morning.

Lukash had met the division chief only once before. He recalled a slender, rather effete man of fifty or fifty-five who stepped lightly on crepe-soled shoes and bore an odd resemblance to Mister Rogers of children’s television. Since that day, every time he thought of the chief he imagined the annoying tune “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” playing softly in the background.

“And is Mr. Twombly with the ambassador?” he asked the secretary.

“I’m afraid he had to leave for Damascus after lunch. A dinner meeting was scheduled there at the last minute with Ambassador Paulson.” She pushed her swivel chair back from the desk and picked up a polished steel ruler gingerly with both hands. “But if there is anything you want to bring to Mr. Twombly’s attention, I’m sure Mr. Pirelli will be able to pass it along by cable.” The intercom buzzed once more, and the cheerful, efficient mask once again came over her face. “Please, go right in.”

Whatever the reasons had been for canceling his return to the States and sending him to Beirut, Lukash would now have to hear them from Ed Pirelli and the ambassador. And if what Strickland had said about his two-month temporary assignment having being converted into a two-year permanent assignment was true, he would now have to plead his case for a reversal before a station chief and an ambassador who each had enlarged his respective fiefdom by Lukash’s addition. If he meant to raise any objection at all, he would have to do so with some delicacy if he was to avoid poisoning the atmosphere for as long as he might be required to stay on.

He twisted the brass doorknob and went in. Ambassador Richard W. Ravenel sat directly opposite the door in an oxblood leather easy chair, his long legs crossed and his arms extended the full length of the padded leather armrests. In a matching leather sofa adjacent to the easy chair, gazing out dreamily across the room toward the Mediterranean, slouched Edwin Pirelli, chief of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Beirut Station. The contrast in appearance between the two men was telling.

Ravenel was a tall, patrician figure with slender, bony hands and a high-domed forehead, accentuated by near-total baldness. Lukash guessed the ambassador was at least sixty, recalling that he had already been a senior career ambassador when, draping himself theatrically with an American flag, he evacuated the American staff from the roof of a tiny Southeast Asian embassy a year before the fall of Saigon. Ravenel’s face was dominated by piercing blue eyes and a long, thin mouth upturned at the corners in perpetual irony. The European lines of his elegant double-breasted navy suit and the odd, idiosyncratic hand gestures assimilated from a forty-year career spent communicating with people of foreign cultures lent the impression that Ravenel was not an American at

all but a sort of composite European American, or what a Marxist might call a rootless cosmopolitan.

Edwin Pirelli could hardly be mistaken for a cosmopolitan. His thick-soled black brogues and his pale blue drip-dry cotton suit, while admittedly handy in Third World posts where dry cleaning was nonexistent or at best unreliable, marked him indelibly as a budget-conscious American embassy functionary. Even his closely cropped black hair—lately infiltrated by gray—and his erect posture seemed to smack of government issue, his fifteen years in the Agency and four years as an Airborne Ranger during the early Vietnam era having left their imprint on him.

Yet, as Lukash observed the ambassador and the station chief together in the moment before they acknowledged his presence, he sensed a deep rapport between the two men that he assumed was the product of their mutual dependence. The station chief, who had raised himself through the ranks by hard work and relentless self-promotion, seemed to assume that the distinguished career ambassador recognized him as a peer, or nearly so, seeking out his views and opinions on delicate matters of state in which judgment and discretion were paramount. Lukash suspected that what the ambassador relied on Pirelli to provide was merely the raw intelligence information that represented a vital source of an American chief of mission's power. He also suspected that the ambassador manipulated Pirelli's tender ego with as much cynical disdain as Pirelli applied in manipulating the egos of his paid foreign agents

“Welcome to Lebanon, Walter,” Ambassador Ravenel said, greeting him warmly and rising slowly from his chair to shake his hand. “I understand that you and Ed know each other from your earlier postings here. If I recall correctly, you completed your Arabic-language training at the embassy's language institute before it was evacuated to Tunis.”

“Yes, sir, I learned Arabic in Beirut, but not at the language institute. I was under nonofficial cover then and studied with private tutors. Back in those days I was under instructions to avoid the embassy. Except for contact with Ed, that is.” He nodded toward Pirelli. “Ed was my inside supervisor.”

Pirelli seized Lukash's hand with genuine enthusiasm. "It's terrific to have you back, Walt," he declared, pumping Lukash's arm vigorously. "When Headquarters approved a new slot for a full-time liaison officer to the Phalange, I knew you were just the man to do it." Pirelli turned to address the ambassador. "Walt knows the people here, he speaks the language, and he has paramilitary experience. What's more, he's a topflight recruiter. Nobody else they nominated even came close. As I told Tom Twombly this morning..."

Pirelli caught himself in mid-sentence and stole a glance at Ambassador Ravenel, who gazed at the two younger men with an expression of benign tolerance. He suggested by an expansive sweep of the hand that they seat themselves

"But I see I'm already getting ahead of myself. Maybe it would be better if Ambassador Ravenel explains how this whole project got off the ground."

Lukash murmured his assent.

The ambassador cleared his throat. "Since the November elections," he began ponderously, as if reading prepared testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "the White House and the National Security Council have been taking a closer look at Lebanon in the context of the Middle East Peace Process. I cannot claim to have been privy to those deliberations, and I would be less than candid if I did not add that I have serious reservations about some of the conclusions that have been reached. Nonetheless, for the present, the new administration seems intent on taking a different approach toward Lebanon and to focus greater attention on the Christian side of the equation here.

"There is a perception in certain circles of the new administration that, if properly nurtured, the leaders of the Phalange Party might be coaxed—perhaps bribed is a better word—into taking a more moderate position toward their Muslim countrymen. The hope in these circles is that a newly unified Lebanese state might be forged out of the remnants of the old one, which appears close to collapse. The foundation of the new Lebanese state would rest upon substantial political concessions toward the non-Christian elements—along with economic and military guarantees for the Christians, of course. The obvious drawback of such a scheme is that Syria would likely come to play a leading role in the

new Lebanese state; thirty thousand Syrian occupation troops would give Damascus a very strong voice at any form of Lebanese constitutional convention.

“There are others in the administration, however, who share the views of certain Israeli leaders that a political solution in Lebanon has become impossible. This faction, if one can call it that, is convinced that the Phalange represents a solid core of pro-Western Lebanese who, if given the means to impose a new political order by force of arms, might be capable of inducing their former enemies to join in creating a new Lebanese state. Such a state, they predict, would be more sympathetic to Western—and, no doubt, Israeli—concerns than the existing Lebanese state while at the same time allowing for a gradual relinquishment of Christian political and military hegemony over time—again, in return for security guarantees. But under this scenario, the U.S. and Israel would play the major role in determining the shape and timing of the reforms. Both the Syrian occupation troops and the PLO military machine would be expelled, presumably by the Israeli Defense Forces, with assistance from the Phalange and possibly from other Lebanese elements.”

The ambassador paused to frown gravely and then continued on a lighter note. “Whether one subscribes to one or the other schools of thought—or neither of them, as I do—it is not difficult to comprehend why the national security advisor has proposed an exploratory effort to see whether expanded cooperation with the Phalange leadership might bear fruit. Increased intelligence cooperation is clearly the starting place. The points of contact already exist. As I understand, the Phalange leadership is enthusiastic about closer ties. And a modest amount of new funding would likely go a long way toward ingratiating the new administration to our Phalange counterparts—and, as I expect, to their Israeli principals. Furthermore, whatever intelligence might be extracted from the Phalange could be pointed to as an example of the benefits to be reaped if we expand the scale of cooperation.

“By this time, Walter, you will doubtless have deduced the sort of thing that is expected of you. You have been selected by your agency, on the advice of Mr. Pirelli here, to act as the United States government’s day-to-day intelligence representative to the Phalange. Your primary duty will be to arrange whatever intelligence support your

Lebanese counterparts may request—subject, of course, to my prior approval and the prior approval of your agency’s leadership. Second, you are to encourage your Lebanese opposite numbers to believe that further American support—perhaps substantial amounts of it—will be contingent upon the letter and spirit of their cooperation. And, third, you are to report the results of their cooperation and any other information of intelligence value that you can glean.

“That, Walter, is what you will be doing for the next two years, or until the intelligence cooperation is terminated, whichever occurs first. Now, do you have any questions?” The ambassador leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap with a look of feline self-satisfaction.

“Well, at the risk of seeming backward,” Lukash began after a long moment’s hesitation, “I would like to confirm for the record that my temporary assignment has now been made into a full two-year tour of duty. You see, my orders are for a sixty-day TDY, and this is the first time I’ve heard anything different.” He paused again, his tone changing to good-natured resignation. “Odd as it may seem, after eight years in the field, I was rather looking forward to my month of home leave and a quiet year or two at a Headquarters desk.”

Lukash knew that the offhand tone and the mention of home leave was a mistake the moment it left his mouth. He could see the ambassador rearing back, waiting to knock the ball out of the park.

“I’m sure you appreciate that the needs of the government often must come before our personal plans,” Ambassador Ravenel began after casually uncrossing and recrossing his legs. “In this case, your agency has assured the Department of State—and the national security advisor, I should add—that you were identified as the best-qualified person for this rather sensitive position.” The ambassador paused, as if to add a few words of personal advice, and then seemed to change his mind. “But I see that your chief of station would like to put in a word.”

Pirelli had nodded solemnly at the end of each one of Ambassador Ravenel’s sentences, as if he were making a running tally in some concealed notebook. He had

stopped nodding when Lukash spoke up, his earnest expression slowly changing into one of thinly concealed exasperation.

“As the ambassador said, Walt, the needs of the government definitely have to come first in this kind of situation. Now, you have the right to decline the assignment, but you ought to think long and hard before taking a step like that. The Agency’s entire personnel system is based on putting the right man in the right place at the right time, and Headquarters is not accustomed to hearing the word ‘no.’ If I know Tom Twombly—and I think I do—he’d likely take your rejection as a slap in the face.”

Lukash took a deep breath and prepared to deliver his response. As he had expected all along, he wasn’t being given any choice in the matter. If Headquarters wanted him in Beirut, they’d make his life miserable if he insisted on anything else. He opened his mouth to announce his capitulation. But before he could say a word, Pirelli cut him short.

“No, don’t give me your answer yet, Walt. Since you haven’t been given any notice of what will be expected of you here, I want to make sure that you’ve heard the whole story before you agree to it. You see, you’ll be getting a good deal of attention at a very high level in this assignment. But on the other hand, it’s not just Washington’s attention you’ll be getting. The Phalange will be over you like stink on shit. They’re clever bastards, and they’re going to look at you as if you were their key to the United States Treasury. You can bet your last Lebanese lira that since Twombly and I called on them this morning, they’ve come up with a wish list of American-made equipment as long as your arm. They’ll wine you and dine you, plead with you, cajole you, get you laid, threaten you, and try to compromise you seven ways to sundown to get what they want out of the U.S. government.

“What’s more, you’re going to be out there on Phalange turf all by yourself. Your phone will be tapped and your flat will be bugged. Nearly everybody you meet will be a Phalange loyalist or under Phalange control. Your neighbors will watch your comings and goings. Your Lebanese girlfriends will be brought in for questioning and forced to report against you. Anything you say, no matter who you say it to, will have the potential to get back to the ears of your liaison sidekicks. And once your presence at Phalange

headquarters becomes known to the Syrians, they'll keep an eye out for you at the Green Line checkpoints as well, in hopes of nabbing you. No doubt about it: you'll be stuck over there on the East Side on Phalange turf for as long as you're in-country.

“Now, having said all that, Headquarters is confident that you can handle that kind of situation—and so am I, or I wouldn't have asked them to send you here. Prosser and I will be commuting over to the East Side several times a week, so it's not as if you'll be totally out of contact with the station. But if you have any doubts about your ability to stay the course, you ought to tell me now. If there's a good reason why you're just not up to it, there's always the chance that Twombly will understand and won't hold it against you.”

Lukash heard out the chief of station but said nothing. It had all happened too quickly for him to find a way out, and now he was stuck indeed. He let out a deep sigh.

“Good. Then it's settled. Congratulations on your new assignment, Walt.” Pirelli turned next to Ambassador Ravenel. “Mr. Ambassador, do you have any other questions for Walter before he leaves us?”

“Just one,” the older man replied. “When you were here before as a language student, did they send you out under your true name?”

“No, I was out here as Bill Conklin in those days,” Lukash responded after a moment's hesitation. “I was expecting an onward assignment to Egypt under the same nonofficial cover as soon as I finished Arabic training. Instead I received orders to report to Saudi Arabia.”

“Do you think it likely that anyone here will remember you as Bill Conklin?”

Lukash realized at once that this was his opening. While cover problems were sometimes brushed aside at Headquarters, the job of chief liaison officer to the Phalange was not one in which the Near East Division could tolerate a flap. He did indeed have a cover problem in the new assignment, but what possible justification could he give for it? He felt the blood drain from his face and both his hands turned cold.

When he had left Beirut in 1975, it was as if an enormous fissure had opened in the earth, swallowing him up and filling in after him. He had left behind no forwarding address and remained in touch with no one he had met in Lebanon. But the problem

remained. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he ransacked his memory for some acceptable justification for why Headquarters should break his new assignment. But it was of no use. After all, what difference would it make to the Phalange that he had used an alias five years earlier? To them, that was ancient history.

“A few people might remember me,” Lukash answered the ambassador at last. “But not many. My Arabic tutor would, I expect, but she moved to Kuwait with her husband the week before I was reassigned to Jeddah. And since I lived on the West Side back then, most of the locals I knew were Muslims and Palestinians. Even before the war they didn’t spend much time on the East Side. So I doubt that I’ll run into any of them over there now.”

Lukash’s attention strayed. He found himself staring at the rows of black-and-white glossy photographs on the wall above Ambassador Ravenel’s head. There was one of Ravenel as a middle-ranking diplomat shaking hands reverentially with JFK in a receiving line. Another showed a slightly older Ravenel seated next to a grinning Hubert Humphrey on an ornately carved oriental divan. A third had Ravenel in a dark overcoat and homburg waiting stiffly at the base of an airline passenger stairway while a grinning Richard Nixon descended toward the tarmac of some frozen airport in northern Europe. There were others, but the lamp on the table at Ambassador Ravenel’s elbow was not bright enough to illuminate all of them. Somehow Lukash managed to recapture his train of thought and continued speaking.

“By now, I suppose, many of the people who knew me back then will have emigrated, either to Europe or the Gulf. And as for the ones who stayed on through five years of civil war...I’d have to question how many of them would remember an American student named Bill Conklin.”

Pirelli flashed a confident look at the ambassador and then turned once more to Lukash. “Then it’s resolved. You made the right choice, Walt. Unless you have anything else to say, Mr. Ambassador, I’ll take Walt downstairs and show him around the communications center before we head across the Green Line to his new digs.”

Ambassador Ravenel rose slowly from his leather armchair and buttoned his suit jacket before extending his hand one last time to his newest subordinate. “This may well

be our first and last meeting, Walter. As you may know, an ambassador's term is served at the pleasure of the president. I submitted my resignation in January along with every other ambassador appointed by the outgoing president. I have a notion that our new chief executive will name my successor very soon.

“The new man will doubtless champion the project in which you are now taking part. In any event, you have my full support for as long as I remain chief of mission. And if you ever wish to reach me, I encourage you to do so through Mr. Pirelli.”

The ambassador released his hand and Lukash knew the interview was over. “Thank you, Ambassador Ravenel. You can count on me to do my level best.”

Pirelli indicated to Lukash by a nod that he wished to remain behind for a moment for a private word with the ambassador. Lukash pulled the heavy door shut and found himself alone in the darkened outer office, all the lights having been extinguished but for two brass sconces flanking the exit.

On an impulse he strode to the glass doors and watched the thinning crowds of Arab youths strolling idly along the Corniche below, drinking coffee and spitting sunflower seed husks onto the sidewalk. Then he stared across the Bay of Beirut toward the sparkling crescent of Antélias and the eastern Phalange-controlled suburbs. For a brief instant something about the view reminded him of Jeddah, as seen from the south along the Red Sea coast. But as he continued to look across the water, he knew there was little objective resemblance between the two cities. The only trait they had in common was that both looked their best at night and from a distance.

Suddenly Lukash wondered if the fourth-floor embassy offices were still arranged as they had been five years ago when Pirelli, then the deputy chief of station, had handed him his orders to Saudi Arabia. Then, as now, the change in assignment had come like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky. He recalled sitting alone in Pirelli's sparsely furnished, windowless office for nearly half an hour in sweaty indecision, pondering whether to accept the job or not while Pirelli met in another room with the chief of the political section.

The Saudi-Yemeni border was the last place on earth he had wanted to be. And why, in heaven's name, a covert action program? He had absolutely no paramilitary

experience then. In an instant the offer had upset every assumption he had cherished about his future in the Agency. He had been asked to take the assignment or leave it—no other alternative was offered. They needed an Arabic-speaking officer, and he was it. As the implications of the cable gradually rippled out to the far reaches of his mind, he had realized that there was to be no Cairo, no home leave, no Headquarters consultations, no opportunity to arrange his affairs, follow through with his plans, or honor his commitments.

Now five years had passed. He had accepted the assignment, spent his year in a dust-choked camp in the Saudi desert, another year and a half in Jeddah, then sixty days of home leave and then off for two years in Jordan. Now he was back where the troubles had started: Beirut. And once again he was completely off balance and unprepared for what lay ahead.

Through the walnut-paneled walls he heard a young woman's musical laugh, followed by the muffled shout of a deep-voiced young marine in the stairwell. "Party up!" the marine's voice shouted. "Give us some tunes, Gunny! Hot damn!" Then the driving beat of Prince set the walls vibrating and overwhelmed everything else.

* * *

"Mr. Pirelli has just pulled up, sir," the black marine corporal announced. The marine followed the movements of a late-model American-made sedan in a row of television monitors on the counter inside his bulletproof cubicle; then he pressed a button under the counter to release the hardened steel bolts securing the door to the lobby. Lukash picked up his bags and shoved the door open with his hip.

A plainclothes Lebanese security guard wearing a low-slung Western-style pistol belt sat on a folding chair to the left of the granite steps. He nodded a silent greeting to Lukash as the latter tossed his bags onto the backseat of Pirelli's four-door Chevrolet sedan.

Lukash noticed the extra thickness of Lexan bonded to the inside of the car's windows and felt the added weight of the door when he slammed it shut. On the streets of a city like Beirut, the Chevrolet would be as conspicuous as Pirelli's drip-dry seersucker suit and brogue shoes. But regulations dictated that the chief of station's car had to be

bulletproofed. And since no foreign supplier was cleared for bulletproofing automobiles to Agency specifications, the CIA's senior spy in Lebanon would have to drive to his secret meetings in an enormous Chevy sedan.

"Beirut's not quite the place you left, is it, Walt?" Pirelli observed sympathetically when they had turned east onto the Corniche. "Take a good look. These people had everything going for them before the fighting. Now all they do is sit around and blame us and the French and the Russians for what they've done to each other."

"So what made you come back?" Lukash asked. "I thought you'd had enough of the Arabs and wanted to get back to the subcontinent."

"I did. When my tour in Beirut ended, Headquarters offered me the chief's slot in Bombay. Then two years later it was chief of Colombo Station. When they asked if I'd go back to Beirut, I wasn't at all sure. In many ways it seemed as if I had just left. But when I talked to people around the division, they all said it was an opportunity not to be passed up. 'Lebanon is ready to heat up again; take it,' they all told me.

"I don't know yet whether they're right or wrong, but for what it's worth, the ambassador seems to agree. He says it's a matter of months before Lebanon hits the front pages again. And Twombly thinks so, too. He told me last night that the new director spent a half hour grilling him on Lebanon before he left. So what I'm telling you is this: recruit us a couple of topflight Phalange agents while you're here, Walt, and you could find yourself riding the crest of a very big wave. What is your rank these days anyway, GS-12?"

Lukash nodded. "The list just came out last month."

"Well, if you can turn in the kind of performance here that you had in Amman, there's every reason to believe that your 13 won't be far away."

"Good thing I'm not superstitious," Lukash added with an uneasy grin.

Pirelli swerved to avoid a cluster of potholes before the darkened hulk that was once the Phoenicia Hotel, then he turned south onto rue Fakhreddine.

Lukash gazed up at the twin towers and at once recalled a dinner party in the Phoenicia's twelfth-floor nightclub two nights before he left Lebanon in 1975. It had been well past ten o'clock, and the Egyptian orchestra had just begun to work up toward

the feverish intensity that usually had to be reached before the first belly dancer would consent to appear on stage. He recalled the mustachioed waiters wearing Ali Baba pantaloons, curly-toed slippers, and elaborately embroidered tunics right out of the Arabian Nights. He remembered the combined aroma of garlic, cardamom, lemon, and mint surrounding the twenty-dish *mezzé* that Claudette Hammouche and her husband had insisted upon for the occasion. And seated beside Lukash with her slender arm resting lazily on his shoulder, he saw...His breath caught in his throat. How long had it been since he had been able to conjure up her face?

“Yup, recruitments are what this business is all about,” Pirelli said with complete self-assurance, as if he were lecturing a newly minted career trainee. “That’s about all they look for through the rank of GS-13. Above that level other things count, too, but a really big recruitment will always get you a promotion, no matter how high your rank. What I’m saying is, don’t fret over the fact that you’re not running a base or a station yet, Walt. Bagging agents is still the name of the game at your level. That’s why I brought you here. The Phalangists have given us a wide-open shot to pick off a few of their officers, and we need a proven recruiter to go in there and sign them up.”

Lukash looked askance at the station chief. “Hold on a second, Ed. I thought my job was to make sure the Phalangists are happy with the support we give them and to get them to pass more information to us. When the ambassador talked about reporting against the Phalange, I didn’t get the idea he meant me to put the arm on them. If I pitch some Phalangist I’ve been in liaison with and he puts up a fuss to his bosses, what’s to prevent Washington’s whole grand scheme from flushing down the toilet?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Pirelli answered impatiently. “I know what the ambassador said. But you don’t work for him, Walt. You work for Headquarters. And what Headquarters wants is a high-level recruitment inside Phalange intelligence. The cooperation between us and the Phalange that the ambassador talked about may or may not pan out. Whether it does or not, the policy makers will judge the Agency on one thing: having access to the Phalange’s secrets. Unless we turn you loose to make recruitments, putting you inside Phalange intelligence is like having the key to an empty room.”

“You know I’ve always been ready to do whatever Headquarters wants,” Lukash answered slowly. “If recruitments are what they want, I’ll do my best. After all, the worst the Phalange can do is toss my butt out of the country, right?”

Pirelli narrowed his eyes, as if unsure how to answer. “Don’t worry about what they might or might not do. I visit the chief of Phalange intelligence at least once a week, and we’ve got his communications covered like white on rice. Believe me, if he suspects you of anything, I’ll know.”

The Chevrolet’s headlights cut through the gloom as the sedan climbed the long hill toward the entrance of the crosstown Fouad Chehab flyover. Then, instead of turning at the underpass that marked the start of the flyover, Pirelli stepped on the gas. Lukash opened his mouth to question the move when he noticed the head-high earthworks blocking both sides of the underpass. Only then did he remember reading a year or two earlier that the flyover had acquired the nickname “Death Alley” for its popularity with snipers and that authorities on both sides of the Green Line had closed it to prevent foolhardy commuters from risking their lives to shave a half hour from their daily crosstown commute.

Pirelli continued south across Avenue de l’Independance and toward the Corniche el Mazraa. “By the way, in case Prosser hasn’t already told you, he will be your inside contact. Did you know each other very well when you were in Saudi together?” Pirelli asked with studied casualness.

“Not very well. But we did work together on an operation a few weeks before I left the kingdom. Connie helped me out of a tight spot, and we both caught some flak for it. But that’s history. I’m sure we’ll do fine together.”

“I hope so. Prosser hasn’t been here long enough for me to get a very clear picture of him. He writes well and is a damned quick study. Works like a mule, too. But I’m not quite sure yet if he has the predatory instinct that makes for a good agent recruiter. Keep an eye on him and tell me what you think.”

The Chevy turned left onto a brightly lit avenue that Lukash recognized as the Corniche el Mazraa and the two men fell back into silence.

Chapter 2

In his dream, Lukash stood alone in the center of a sand-swept blacktop lane flanked on both sides by high, dun-colored walls. The road curved gradually to the left across flat terrain, and he realized that he could not be seen by anyone located fifty meters to his front or rear. Apart from the road and the walls and the cloudless sky, nothing else was within his view but an ancient battleship-gray Land Rover and a rust-eaten white Mercedes sedan parked head-to-head across the full width of the asphalt and blocking the way.

Lukash stepped toward the barrier with painful slowness, as if he were wading through waist-high water against a powerful current. He stooped to lower his center of gravity yet was scarcely able to put one foot ahead of the other. Just beyond the makeshift barrier, a Fiat and a Renault waited at the curb. Still farther, a dark four-door Volvo stopped ten meters short of the barricade while a black-hooded militiaman a few paces away trained his Kalashnikov assault rifle on the Volvo's driver.

Suddenly the Land Rover's rear door flew open, and Lukash saw a group of five Lebanese civilians herded at gunpoint from the Volvo toward the Rover. Muffled shouts issued from the militiamen's loose-fitting hoods, but nothing Lukash heard was intelligible.

At the back of the group, a slender woman of about twenty-five in a sleeveless flowered sundress stood in profile to Lukash. From a distance he studied her familiar Mediterranean profile, small-boned ballerina's figure, and lustrous chestnut hair tied at the nape of her neck. But now her cheeks were ashen, her jaw firmly set. He could see the terror in her eyes. Her hands rested on the shoulders of a child no more than four or five years of age, evidently her daughter, who reached up and grasped her mother's wrists.

Lukash tried to advance more quickly toward the barricade, but his legs would not respond. He attempted to shout a warning, but no voice came forth. The hooded militiamen and their captives behaved as if he did not exist, as if no act of his could possibly affect what would happen. Yet he knew that unless he intervened, the woman and child were lost.

* * *

An artillery shell exploded at close range, perhaps as little as a block away from Lukash's East Beirut apartment, and reverberated the length of Avenue de l'Indépendance. Lukash sat erect and swung his feet onto the floor. With no light illuminating the room but the moon shining through the half-open French doors to the balcony, he found it difficult to remember where he was. The heavy floor-length curtains drawn back on either side of the glass doors swung in unison like gigantic pendulums set in motion by the shock of the blast.

Lukash reached for the lamp beside his bed. It took him two or three seconds to recognize the chrome-and-glass coffee table where his half-empty tumbler of duty-free Glenfiddich now rested, the pair of cordovan leather armchairs over which he had draped his jacket and sweater, and beside them the black lacquer étagère with its bare shelves. All the furniture appeared European, most of it of modern Scandinavian design.

Lukash dimly recalled Ed Pirelli's account of how the flat's owner, a middle-age men's fashion importer, was leaning over the sink to shave one morning when a stray .50-caliber armor-piercing slug slammed through two solid hardwood doors and lodged itself in his upper thigh. A few centimeters to the left, and it would have hit the femoral artery; a few to the right, and it might have converted him from a baritone to a contralto. The importer had put the flat up for lease the next day.

On their arrival at the flat, Pirelli had taken Lukash onto the veranda to point out how many stray bullets had hit the western side of the building, the one facing the port and the Green Line. A dozen or more spent rounds lay at their feet like dead insects, misshapen from their fatal collisions with the building's stone facing. Because the flat comprised no less than four bedrooms and three full baths, the practical solution was to close off the westernmost rooms and live on the sheltered eastern side of the flat.

Lukash switched off the light once again, stretched out on his back, and cradled his head in his folded palms. Somewhere to the west, beyond the port, another explosion sent out shock waves in his direction. *What on earth am I doing here?* he asked himself as his ears followed the trailing hiss of the echo. Nobody had twisted his arm when the

idea had first been broached. He could have said no and Headquarters might have found someone else.

Perhaps it had been the flattery. Lukash recalled the back-channel message that had said he was everyone's first choice for the job. Perhaps the implied promise of full pay for less than a full measure of work had also factored into his decision. The message had implied that the two-month TDY would be almost a vacation. Two or three hours at Phalange headquarters each day, a car meeting near the Green Line with his inside contact, an hour or two spent at the typewriter, and the greater part of his work would be finished. He could spend the rest of the day skiing at Farayya or swimming or boating at Kaslik, for it was the time of year when the winter snows had not yet melted in the mountains but the sun was already approaching summer strength at the shore. An hour and a half of driving was all that separated the two extremes. And his evenings, of course, would be free to allow him to enjoy Beirut's celebrated nightlife.

An irregular series of muffled pops interrupted his reverie. They sounded like grenades or mortar rounds landing in the next neighborhood. Then the crackle of small arms fire arose from no place in particular and before long seemed to be all around him. He tried to separate out each constituent sound, but soon his concentration lapsed and he drifted back into sleep.

In his dreams Lukash found himself back on the sand-swept lane between the dun-colored walls, watching mother and child step toward the gaping rear door of the Land Rover. The woman turned, as if startled by the presence of someone behind her, and focused a reproachful glare upon him. Lukash started, opened his eyes, and took a deep breath. He felt the same sense of impotence, of utter inconsequentiality, that he had felt outside the Sabra refugee camp on the way north from the airport. He thought he had known what to do then, but he no longer felt quite so confident.

He rose a second time and strode across the room to the coffee table. Beside his tumbler of whiskey was the black pigskin shaving kit. He upended it and poured its contents onto the table. Taking up a steel nail file, he slipped it between the leather bottom of the kit and its leather sides and worked it around until he heard a click and the bottom swung open.

A small manila envelope and a blue-jacketed U.S. tourist passport fell onto the glass table. Setting the passport aside, he pried open the envelope's metal clasp and carefully emptied its contents into his hand. First to fall out was a slim gold wedding band engraved on the inside with the initials, M.R.K. and W.F.C., and a date, 3-15-76. He slipped the ring onto his finger, slowly removed it, and then set it aside.

Then he slipped from the envelope a delicate gold chain, handmade in the traditional style of the Arab goldsmiths of Aleppo. He stretched it out to full length between his hands and laid it out on the glass tabletop.

Finally he removed a glossy black-and-white photo of the type sold by itinerant photographers in Lebanese nightclubs. It showed a jubilant party of six gathered around a circular table. How long had it been since he'd last looked at the photo? Three years? Four? The resemblance between the woman beside him in the photo and the woman he had seen in his dream was uncanny. Now that he was back in Beirut, the memories were returning. If he were going to stay here much longer, there would be no avoiding them.

Lukash gently scooped up the ring and the chain, dropped them into the envelope, and did the same for the photo after one last penetrating look. Then he returned the envelope and passport to their cavity in the false bottom of the shaving kit, pressed the bottom shut, and replaced the razor, toothbrush, soap dish, and other toiletries.

At last he returned to bed, thrust the memories out of his mind, and fell back into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter 3

A Lebanese army officer in an old-fashioned leather tank driver's helmet and goggles peered out the hatch of a parked Panhard armored car and followed Conrad Prosser with his eyes as Prosser's Renault climbed through the pine forest toward the gate of the American ambassador's residence. The steep mountain road from the Damascus Highway to Yarzé was always heavily patrolled, not so much for the ambassador's benefit as for that of his nearest neighbor, the Lebanese minister of defense.

Prosser downshifted when he saw the stretch of parked cars that lined the road outside the residence gate. Nearly all of them were chauffeur-driven Mercedes and BMW town cars with liveried drivers who passed their idleness by playing cards with one another on the polished hoods of their splendid driving machines. In the fading glow of the setting sun, Prosser scanned the diplomatic license plates and made mental notes of the numerical country codes he recognized and those he did not. First was the Egyptian ambassador's black Mercedes, just behind it the French chargé d'affaires's cigar-shaped Citroën, and three spaces farther along was the Argentinean ambassador's silver Jaguar. It was rather a high-toned crowd for an evening of Dixieland jazz, he thought.

As soon as Prosser reached the gate, a uniformed guard popped out from the whitewashed sentry box and pulled open the rivet-studded sheet-metal gate. He returned Prosser's nod of acknowledgment with a ragged salute and wasted no time in closing the gate as soon as the Renault was inside.

Prosser parked in the staff lot, tucked well out of sight behind the residence, then backtracked along the service road to the building's monumental white marble façade, terraced gardens, and sweeping panorama of the Bay of Beirut to the north and west. Noting that the receiving line had already dispersed, he shut the front door quietly behind him and advanced through the entry hall. All at once a low, rhythmic chant, accompanied by the steady beat of tom-toms and the clacking of wood on wood, reached his ears from the sitting room ahead. Dixieland jazz it was not.

“Conrad, you're just in time. They started only moments ago.”

It was Muriel Benson, Ambassador Ravenel's secretary, looking surprisingly elegant in a sleeveless black cocktail frock that flattered her ample but shapely figure. Tonight was Muriel's night to play hostess, as the ambassador's wife was away on her quarterly shopping excursion to Florence and Rome. Muriel was playing the role for all it was worth.

"Come along quickly, now, and I'll find you a seat. You won't believe these people, Conrad, really you won't. Yesterday the ambassador was nearly apoplectic when Damascus cabled that the jazz quartet was canceling, and all we could get for tonight was the Great Plains Indian Dancers. Imagine Red Indian dancers, here, of all places! I thought the ambassador was going to drive across the border and personally wring the information officer's neck. But you should listen to him now. 'Everybody has Dixieland bands these days,' is what I heard him tell the minister of defense a few moments ago. 'The French have them. Even the Russians have their pale imitation, but only America has honest-to-God Red Indians!'"

"Do you suppose the minister knows the difference between a Red Indian and the other kind?"

"Don't be silly. Hollywood Westerns are as popular over here as they are in Kansas City or Pittsburgh. John Wayne is practically canonized among the Maronites, and Clint Eastwood is box office gold on both sides of town. But come along, now, Conrad, have a seat. The show is only an hour long and you've already missed the first two numbers."

The dancers were very much as Prosser imagined they would be, draped in buffalo hide and decorated with war paint and dancing a samba-like step inside a circle of five chanting elders. He soon lost interest and let his eyes wander around the room. At Ed Pirelli's urging, the ambassador had promised to add to the guest list the names of three or four junior Arab diplomats for station officers to meet and, if possible, invite to lunch or drinks to assess them as possible recruitment targets.

Prosser spotted a few younger Arabs in dark suits who looked like the ones he was after and etched their facial features in his memory so that he could approach them during dessert after the show. As he scanned the faces in the crowd, he also kept his eyes

open for good-looking women. Such an occasion was not to be entirely wasted on business.

“The next dance in our program tells the story of two tribes.” One of the dancers was speaking now, a tall, imposing young man with high cheekbones, a hawkish nose, and shoulder-length straight black hair tied loosely behind his neck with a rawhide thong. Yet as Prosser watched him speak, the prominent nose seemed less Native American than Semitic and his accent less Great Plains than White Plains.

“The two tribes summered for many generations on opposite sides of a Great River that produced an abundance of fish and attracted great herds of buffalo, flocks of waterfowl, and more than enough game for ten tribes. Still, from time to time, each tribe would send raiding parties against the other to steal horses, food, and women. As a result, those on both sides of the river who had lost family members or valuable property became accustomed to taking their revenge. And so the raids became ever larger and more frequent, until at last it came to war.

“Summer after summer the fighting continued, ceasing only in the winter when the tribes went to their separate retreats. At last the chief of the first tribe called upon the Great Spirit to bring a scourge upon the other and to remove it forever from the banks of the Great River. Soon the chief’s prayer was answered, and the White Man made war on the second tribe and drove it from the opposite side of the river to a place many days’ ride to the south. At this the chief ordered a feast of thanks to the Great Spirit, but no sooner did the first tribe sit down to its feast than the White Man’s army returned and massacred the gathering down to the last man, woman, and child.”

The young Indian, if that is really what he was, paused and scanned the faces of his audience as if he were telling the story for the first time and had found a particularly sympathetic listener.

“I see that your city has a river. They tell me that fighting often rages between tribes to the east and west of the river and that revenge has taken root in many hearts. I counsel you: remember the story of our ancestors and learn from our errors.”

He abruptly broke off his speech, gave a nod to the drummers, and took up a monotonous wailing chant. The Lebanese government officials and foreign diplomats in the room exchanged meaningful glances with their wives and colleagues.

The River Dance was a sluggish, swaying affair, and the river that it conjured up in Prosser's mind was shallow and murky, with malodorous marshes along both banks. His attention wandered and he caught sight of a slender, frizzy-haired brunette in a green silk dress, obviously not an Arab, four rows ahead and to his right. There was something about her that he recognized even from behind, and he wished she would turn around even slightly so that he could see her in full profile.

All at once Prosser became aware of a low rumble coming from the open French doors in the foyer. It rose rapidly into an insistent roar that mounted and fell in waves and from time to time resembled the crackle of radio static. A few heads in the rows ahead of him glanced nervously behind them, as if to determine whether anyone else had noticed that Beirut's monthlong East-West cease-fire had just collapsed.

Prosser let his mind wander during the remaining dance number, pondering first whether tonight's battle in the commercial district would stand in the way of his plans to cross the Green Line early the next morning. Having decided it probably would not, he went on to size up which of the young Arab diplomats in the room looked most approachable. If he could elicit from just one of them his date and place of birth, previous postings, current areas of responsibility, and a few trivial bits of personal background, he would have enough for a name-trace request that would create for Headquarters the illusion of movement on the agent-recruiting front.

At last the drums of the Great Plains Indians fell silent and the dancers' shuffling feet ceased to stir. They took their final bow and disappeared into the guest quarters of the residence to change out of their costumes and join the audience for dessert and coffee. Prosser tried to imagine a conversation between a Plains Indian, born and raised on a parched reservation somewhere in Oklahoma or South Dakota, and a Lebanese plutocrat whose time was divided evenly between Beirut, Paris, Cannes, and Mègeve.

"Have you seen the ambassador?" He felt a gentle tug at his elbow and found a pale and jittery Muriel Benson at his side. She was at the head of the milling crowd that

had begun to file past him toward the dining room, where cake, cookies, and coffee were being served.

Prosser shook his head. "Would you like me to look for him?"

"Would you mind terribly? Tell him Raymond needs him in the kitchen right away," she whispered. "There's a problem with the cake."

"The cake? Golly, I'll let him know right away, Muriel. I'm sure he'll want to drop whatever he's doing."

Muriel ignored the sarcasm. "You are such a dear, Conrad."

Prosser let the crowd file by. The ambassador was nowhere in sight. At last he followed the other guests into the dining room and lined up at the bar behind an impeccably suited Arab with a Vandyke beard whom he recognized from Pirelli's description as the first secretary of the Saudi Arabian embassy. The Saudis had made themselves particularly scarce in Beirut since a carload of pro-Iranian fanatics had winged one of their economic attachés during a recent kidnap attempt. With their own civil war temporarily in abatement, the Lebanese had felt compelled to take on the conflict of their distant neighbors, Iran and Iraq.

Prosser watched with keen interest to see whether the Saudi, whose culture demanded strict adherence to the strictures of Islam, ordered fruit juice or scotch at the bar. If the latter, he resolved to pursue him for all he was worth. If the former, he would make a beeline for the Egyptian in the corner swirling a snifter of cognac.

But before the outcome was clear, Prosser's attention was drawn to the sight of Raymond, the ambassador's moon-faced Lebanese chef, entering the room with a gigantic sheet cake decorated as Old Glory. The ambassador followed him into the room with his customary pomp, two steps back, with Muriel at his heels. No sooner did he pass through the door, however, than he stopped short. His face grew crimson, and it became apparent that the chief of mission was seething with some suppressed rage. At the same time, Muriel's usual bright-eyed, capable air seemed to have deserted her. A titter of embarrassed laughter arose from among the guests standing around the dining room table as the cake was laid to rest.

Prosser peered over the shoulders of a pair of overdressed Lebanese matrons loading their plates with petit fours and saw at once what had so disturbed the ambassador: a wag in the bakery had substituted six-pointed Stars of David for the five-pointed stars in Old Glory's field of blue. By so doing, the prankster had deftly called attention to the U.S. government's hypocrisy in professing to uphold Lebanon's territorial integrity against the Syrian occupation while turning a blind eye to the Israeli-occupied security zone in South Lebanon. It was the ambassador's job to present the U.S. position as a single consistent fabric—yet here was an irksome thread dangling before everyone's eyes.

“What would monsieur like to drink?” the white-jacketed bartender asked as soon as the tittering died down.

Prosser noticed the bearded Saudi carrying away an orange juice and cursed under his breath. “Remy Martin, please, neat,” he replied. He took his drink and backed away from the table, intending to pursue the Egyptian in the corner. A trio of giggling college-age girls in strapless cocktail dresses now occupied the spot where the Egyptian had been. An elderly Lebanese couple directly ahead of him disappeared around a corner into the foyer, and Prosser decided to follow them onto the terrace.

As he passed through the French doors, he heard the low rumble of faraway shelling and realized that what had drawn so many guests outdoors was not the cool night air but the spectacle of tracer fire leaping back and forth across the Green Line. From the port in the city's north down through the Forêt des Pins to Hazmiyé in the south, even from a distance of seven or eight kilometers the arcs of brilliant light pouring into the no-man's-land held the onlookers entranced.

Two or three minutes passed and the battle's hypnotic effect began to wear off. Prosser turned his back once more on the city, and almost at once he spotted the missing Egyptian, waving his snifter in one hand and a panatella in the other, driving home a point to Eric Alleyn, a quick-witted young political officer from the British embassy. Prosser sensed that Alleyn would welcome having someone take the Egyptian off his hands, so he set off to join them.

“Guido? Is that really you, my dear? Guido Novara?”

An oddly familiar woman's voice called out from only a few steps away, but because she was backlit, Prosser did not recognize her until she was directly upon him. Then he remembered the name on the Italian passport he had borrowed some two years ago in Jeddah.

"Guido! Yes, it is you, Guido! I could have sworn I saw you during the show, but I wanted to be certain before I made a complete fool of myself. You do remember, don't you? Tullia Novara? Jeddah airport? After all, we were husband and wife, Guido, if only for an evening."

"My God, Lorraine!" Prosser exclaimed. "What in God's name are you doing in Beirut? I thought you had gone back to London or Dublin or someplace civilized."

He laughed and she joined in. Her laughter had a gay music to it, and the way she threw her head back gave the impression that nothing could disturb her sense of well-being. Even on the night two years before in Saudi Arabia, when she faced the prospect of a brutal interrogation by Saudi security forces and a lengthy sojourn in a Saudi women's prison, her laugh still held the magical power of somehow making it all go away, at least for a few shining moments.

"I'm flying again, with Middle East Airlines. I've gone back to what I did when I first came out to the Middle East. Ghassan insisted that I quit when we were married. But once all that was behind me and I found myself back in London without a job, it seemed the best thing for me was to go back to the work I've always loved doing."

"But for heaven's sake, Lorraine, why Beirut? The airport here is closed nearly as many days as it's open. MEA can barely meet its payroll."

"Oh, it's only a ten-week contract. They need an in-flight services trainer for their new class of air hostess trainees. As soon as Walter's TDY is finished, we'll go back to Washington and I'll find a job flying out of Dulles."

Lorraine must have seen the cloud of confusion pass across his face. In the moment before she held her hand up to silence him, her green eyes took on an expression that passed quickly from doubt to understanding to resignation.

"Don't tell me. I already know what you're thinking, Guido. You see, the reason Walter didn't say anything to you about my coming is that he didn't know about it. I've

been in London these past four weeks seeing old friends and working out the details of my return. I haven't breathed a word of it yet to Walter. He has arrived by now, hasn't he?"

Prosser felt himself redden. Suddenly beads of perspiration began forming on his upper lip despite the cool offshore breeze. He drew in a deep breath. "Lorraine, I don't exactly relish being a shit, but I can't talk to you about what Walt may or may not be doing. If he told you anything, that's his business. But whatever he said, I can't confirm or deny it."

"That sounds so very official of you, Guido. Certainly you can let Walter know I'm here, can't you?"

"If I said I could, I'd be confirming to you that he's in-country. Didn't he leave you a forwarding address or give you some kind of contact instructions?"

Lorraine let out a deep sigh, and within an instant all of her innate charm and buoyancy seemed to escape her. "You know how unreliable Walter can be. Before I left Amman, he said he'd meet me in London on his way back to the States. But after a week I grew tired of waiting."

Prosser avoided her gaze. There was something troubling about a woman who felt compelled to follow a man to a country in the midst of a civil war when he hadn't even given her the courtesy of a forwarding address. "So how long have the two of you been together?" he asked in an effort to break the silence. "You left Saudi Arabia at the end of '77, wasn't it?"

"January 4, 1978, to be precise. I went back to work for British Airways in London in mid-January, and ten weeks later I looked up Walt on my first flight to Amman. When the airline refused to base me in Amman, I quit and got a job flying for Royal Jordanian. Walter and I have been together ever since."

Prosser cast a quick glance toward the dining room and its cake with six-pointed stars. "Listen, Lorraine. The party is winding down. Let me take you back to town and we can catch up on what's been happening. You're staying in West Beirut, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Hotel?"

“The Riviera, on the Corniche.”

“That’s only a couple of blocks from my apartment. Come on. When we get back, I’ll buy you a drink and we’ll see what we can do about straightening out old Walt.”

At the mention of Walt’s name, the magical smile lit up Lorraine’s face, and she took Prosser’s arm as he led her toward the door.

* * *

“Do you suppose they intend to carry on like this all night?” Lorraine inquired, turning away from the red glow of tracer fire as Prosser rejoined her on the balcony of his fourth-floor flat and gazed out over the Mediterranean. The din held steady but was not overpowering; rather, it was as if a thunderstorm was passing somewhere offshore.

He handed her a fresh gin and tonic and settled into the wicker armchair beside her. “The shelling generally tapers off before dawn, around four or five in the morning. But don’t worry. After a few days, you won’t even notice it unless it comes within a couple blocks of you.”

“Don’t shells ever land in this part of the city?”

“Not many since I’ve been here. Where you’re sitting right now is quite safe. You see, incoming rounds almost always arrive from the southeast, from along the Green Line. There’s a hell of a lot of bricks and mortar between us and the southeast side of the building. Unfortunately, the Riviera Hotel isn’t quite as well shielded as this building, but unless you’re in an eastward-facing room, I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.”

Lorraine stood up to inhale the fragrant blossoms of the potted frangipani tree at her side. She didn’t look reassured. “You have a lovely apartment, Conrad. Did you find it yourself?”

Prosser leaned back in his wicker chair and took another sip of bourbon. “The embassy has it under a long-term lease. My predecessor lived in it, and so did his predecessor, and the fellow before that, most probably. Not ideal from a security standpoint. But you couldn’t find a better view of the Corniche anywhere in West Beirut.”

“Conrad, please tell me if what I’m about to ask would create a problem for you or embarrass you in any way. But would you mind terribly if I spent the night on your lovely American sofa?”

Prosser laughed and reached out to take her hand. “Of course not, Lorraine. But why don’t you take my bedroom and I’ll stay on the sofa? I rather like sleeping out here in the salt air from time to time.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it. But I will accept your offer of the sofa. I simply can’t bear another night in that hotel. There are only three of us on the entire floor, and the other two give me gooseflesh. Thank God Muriel has invited me to stay with her for the next week until Walter arrives.”

Prosser let the reference to Lukash pass without comment. “I’ll fetch you a towel and washcloth and some fresh bed linens. If you need a toothbrush or anything, help yourself to what you can find in the medicine cabinet.”

* * *

Prosser had not quite passed from twilight consciousness into a deep sleep when he heard the latch on his door click open. Through half-open eyes he saw a silvery glow spread across the wall opposite the partially open door. A slender figure in an oversize white terry robe approached from the moonlit corridor and entered the bedroom.

“Conrad? Are you awake?”

“Yes. Is anything wrong?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“The shelling?”

“I don’t think so.” She fell silent, as if weighing her words, and sat at the edge of the bed. “Conrad, have I ever asked you whether you’re married?”

It was his turn to be silent. He rolled over onto his side and faced her. “I can’t recall if you did or not,” he answered at last. “Anyway, I’m not. I was once but not anymore. My divorce decree arrived here shortly after I did.”

“I’m sorry,” Lorraine replied with the proper note of sympathy. “Do you miss her?”

“Oh, once in a great while, I suppose. Not as often as I expected.”

“Are you still in love with her?”

Prosser looked up at the loose mess of hair spilling over Lorraine’s shoulders and then noticed a spark of anticipation in her eyes. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think I ever was. No, I just married her.”

Lorraine bent over him and placed her palm flat against his cheek. He put his own hand over hers, holding it there for a long moment before reaching down to tug on the belt that held the terry robe around her waist. It fell open, revealing the glowing whiteness of her thighs and the outlines of her small, conical breasts. She shrugged her shoulders and let the robe slide down her back and onto the floor.

* * *

The sun lit up the borders of the heavy curtains like the corona of an eclipsed sun. When the alarm buzzer sounded, Prosser sat bolt upright and shielded his face from the band of blinding light where the curtains failed to reach the floor. Without opening his eyes, he managed to find the clock and turn off the rasping buzz with a deft tap of his fingers.

“Good morning,” Lorraine greeted him huskily. She rolled onto her back and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her slender hands.

“Sorry about the alarm. It has a nasty bark, but I need it to cut through the morning haze sometimes. Did you sleep well?”

“Beautifully,” she replied. “And you?”

“Never better. I guess I was more tired than I realized. Listen, Lorraine, I’m sorry about—”

“Don’t say it. There’s no need to be sorry. All I wanted was someone to hold me and listen, and you were wonderful.”

“It’s kind of you to say that. But I don’t generally have this sort of problem, so I don’t know exactly what to say. Maybe it takes a while before the subconscious realizes that a divorce decree is intended to set you free again.”

Lorraine looked at him as if she were trying to read his mind. “If it’s Walter you’re thinking about, don’t give it another thought. As I said before, Walter can be thoroughly unreliable. I’ve had to learn not to depend on him when I feel the need to be close to someone. It’s not that I don’t love him, because I believe I do, but I also believe a

woman is capable of loving more than one man. And right now, Conrad, I find myself growing rather fond of you.”

She pulled herself on top of him and sat with her ivory thighs astride his waist, twisting the curly hairs on his stomach around her fingertips. “Why don’t you leave me a message at the Riviera this afternoon and let me know if you’ll be free tonight. Or tomorrow night, for that matter. I’m not going anywhere for a while. Heavens, for all I know, there may not even be a Walter Lukash.”

Chapter 4

Prosser switched on the car radio as he entered the refuse-strewn wasteland opposite the Saint Simon bathing beach, three kilometers south of the city. He turned up the volume and listened carefully for the tone that announced the beginning of the eight o'clock news. The morning broadcasts always carried a complete listing of the hot spots that Beirut's morning commuters should avoid if they wished to escape sniping, shelling, kidnapping, car bombs, and other local hazards.

According to Radio Liban, the unofficial casualty figures from last night's battle were two Phalangist fighters dead and five wounded, and from the National Movement, four fighters dead and eight wounded. The civilian totals would be higher, the announcer predicted, but those numbers would not be available for another twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, civil defense workers were laboring around the clock to collect the remains of the noncombatants who had cowered in cellars and windowless interior rooms until shell, rocket, or bullet had found them.

With new cease-fire talks not having yet begun, both the port and Sodeco crossings remained closed to morning commuters. Since Prosser knew this generally created mile-long backups at the National Museum checkpoint, he opted for the more distant but less frequented Galerie Semaan crossing, located six or seven kilometers southeast of the city. After a mere twenty-minute delay in the slums of Shiyah before reaching the Syrian checkpoint, he found the crossing open for business and was soon across the Beirut River moving north toward suburban Sinn el Fil, in Christian East Beirut.

Five years of civil war had stripped away more than a few layers of civilization from Lebanese society, among them the enforcement of speed limits and traffic regulations. The cardinal rule of the road was to trust one's horn, floor the accelerator, and yield only to superior mass. Prosser merged aggressively into the Sinn el Fil traffic circle and peeled off to the right toward Jdeidé and the coastal autostrade.

A few moments later he found himself amid a barren tract on the outskirts of suburban East Beirut that was neither agricultural, residential, nor industrial, yet

possessed the least attractive features of all three. Half-built warehouses abandoned at the outbreak of hostilities and shabby stone farmhouses with haphazardly tended truck gardens dotted the low hills, each surrounded by rusting carcasses of dead Fiats and Peugeots.

Prosser drove on, reaching the coastal suburb of Jdeidé with half an hour to spare. Instead of continuing north along the Mediterranean, he passed through the tidy bedroom community that occupied the thin wedge of fertile land between the coastal autostrade and the foothills of the Sannine Range, then started up the narrow mountain road toward Ain Saadé and the summer resorts of Beït Meri and Broummana. After only five minutes of climbing, the humid coastal air became drier and took on a perceptible chill.

Halfway to Ain Saadé, Prosser steered the Renault off the road at the crest of a hill overlooking the commercial port and parked on the gravel shoulder. Directly below him was St. Georges Bay and the southern terminus of the autostrade, while to the north lay the prosperous seaside suburbs of Jall ed Dib and Antélias. Barely visible in the haze beyond them lay the thriving harbor town of Jounié. Prosser turned his eyes west, where a huddled mass of whitewashed houses clung to the steep slopes of Jebel Achrafiyé, just east of the Green Line separating East and West Beirut, their red tile roofs blazing in the brilliant rays of the morning sun. As many times as he had looked out over the city from this or one of the other hills above Jdeidé, he never ceased to marvel at the rugged beauty of the land and its wondrous faculty for concealing the wounds inflicted by five years of armed conflict.

Having nearly squandered his half-hour head start, Prosser retreated to the coast, keeping a vigilant eye open for any clues that he might be under surveillance. He picked up the autostrade at Jdeidé, rode it for just under five minutes, and exited to the north at Antélias. Reasonably certain by now that he had not been followed, he backed into a parking space two blocks south of his Lebanese agent's twelve-story apartment block.

The time was ten minutes after nine, and any residents of the building who held down jobs would already be on their way to work. Prosser entered through the rear door. The concierge's chair on the opposite side of the lobby was unoccupied, as were both elevators. He entered the elevator to the left, rode to the tenth floor, and then walked

down two flights of stairs to César Khalifé's eight-floor apartment to throw off anyone who might have seen him enter.

He rang the bell and a melodic young voice called out something unintelligible. Then footsteps rapped a hasty beat across the hardwood floor. The door opened and a slender, dark-eyed woman in her late twenties stood before him, dressed modestly in a charcoal wool skirt and a white silk blouse, a leather art portfolio slung over her shoulder.

Prosser had seen César's daughter only once before. As he recalled, her long chestnut hair had been gathered behind her neck with a brightly colored silk scarf, as it was now. And, as before, her erect carriage and uplifted chin conveyed an air of aloofness tinged with disdain, as if she knew what he was about and wanted no part of it.

"*Sabah al-khayr*, Muna," he began. "Is your father at home?"

"*Sabah an-nour*," she replied with studied politeness. "*Entrez, s'il vous plait.*" Her smile was businesslike and devoid of any spark of interest in him or the work that had brought him there. "My father is expecting you and will join you in a moment. Would you like some coffee or some mint tea?" she continued in French.

"No, thank you. I've already had some this morning. Besides, you look as though you're on your way out." He spoke in English because he knew her English was at least as good as, if not better than, his French or Arabic.

A wry smile formed at the corners of her mouth and her aloof expression softened. Beneath Muna's businesslike façade was a woman of considerable allure, Prosser thought. He wished he could see more of her, but could not imagine how it could be done as long as her father remained an agent of Beirut Station.

"*Oui, c'est ça*," she replied with a careless shrug. "*Au revoir, monsieur.*"

Before he could tell her to call him by his first name, Muna Khalifé was past him and on her way to the lobby.

Prosser looked around the room. The decor was typical of the Levantine merchant class—Louis of Lebanon, as he had once heard Muriel Benson call it—a profusion of oriental rugs, ornate woodwork, gold leaf, and red velvet along with an untidy collection of souvenir knickknacks from France, Switzerland, Japan, and North America, balanced by the melancholy of painted icons of the Maronite Catholic Church. The decor showed

the influence of César's late wife—nothing had been moved or replaced since her death two years before, when a car bomb exploded outside the bakery where she had gone to buy bread.

“Bonjour, bonjour, mon ami,” came an unexpectedly jolly voice in the corridor. Prosser caught sight of a short, barrel-chested man with a florid complexion and shiny gray hair combed back in marcelled waves. He seemed the picture of the Levantine merchant in his raw silk suit, tailored white shirt worn unbuttoned to the breastbone, and wraparound Alain Delon sunglasses worn on top of his head.

According to César's file at Headquarters, before the outbreak of civil war in 1975, César had been a reasonably prosperous importer of electric appliances, owning a showroom and warehouse off rue Weygand in the heart of the old commercial district. The building had been gutted by fire in the first week of the war and now stood near the center of the no-man's-land separating East and West Beirut. Because César's wealth had been almost completely tied up in his building and inventory, the loss of merchandise and real estate had forced him to liquidate all of his other investments and even to sell his ancestral mountain villa near Beït Meri to pay his creditors. Having managed to retain little more than his Mercedes and his furniture, César moved his wife and daughter into a high-rise apartment in Antélias on the strength of a mortgage to his sister and brother-in-law.

With the loss of his business, César threw himself into the war effort with abandon, commanding a battery of Chamounist artillery in the hills around Beït Meri from May of 1975 until the autumn of the following year, when the arrival of Syrian tanks brought temporary peace to Lebanon and gave the Christian alliance between the Chamounist National Liberal Party and the more powerful Phalange Party sufficient time to unravel. By the end of October, César had found it impossible to work with his Phalange counterparts, who baited and harassed the Chamounist NLP officers at every opportunity. He resigned his commission, went back to being a rank-and-file member of the NLP's political organization, and set about rebuilding his electrical goods business.

Around the same time, Prosser recalled from the file, César had found an occasion to visit the American embassy's consular section, where he met a mid-level consular

officer named Edwin Pirelli. During the winter of 1976–1977, César had spent many evenings at Pirelli’s apartment pouring out his bitterness toward the Phalangists and their relentless drive for political dominance over the Lebanese Christian community. Pirelli was nothing if not a patient listener, and his penetrating questions also displayed an astute grasp of Lebanese history and politics, which further endeared him to the merchant-warrior.

From time to time, Pirelli pressed César to back up his opinions with facts that Pirelli could cite to his superiors at the American embassy to show that he had his finger on the pulse of Lebanon’s political life. Before long, César found himself canvassing his friends and relatives regularly about their views on specific political issues and cultivating those of his acquaintances who held positions in the Phalange Party or militia.

One evening, after a particularly enjoyable meal at Pépé’s, a celebrated fish restaurant overlooking the Roman Harbor at Byblos, César confided to Pirelli his recent difficulties in holding on to his most lucrative distributorship, that of a French kitchen appliance manufacturer. Owing to his distressed financial circumstances, he was no longer able to carry the manufacturer’s full line of products or to keep ample levels of inventory in stock, nor could he adequately promote the products that were coming under intense competitive pressure from the Japanese. As a result, the manufacturer threatened to take away César’s exclusive franchise for Lebanon—or, at the very least, to divide it between two or more regional distributors. César had tried to procure a loan to support an increased level of business, but the interest rates the local banks were charging were nothing less than extortionate. After servicing the debt, he would have been left with little or nothing with which to support himself and his daughter.

Pirelli had asked what rate the banks were charging and how much money César would need to maintain his current living standard in the event that he committed himself to a loan on the banks’ terms. César named a figure and Pirelli nodded once. A moment of silence followed, and then Pirelli offered to pay César a handsome salary for doing nothing more than continuing his political reporting. A smile of happy disbelief spread slowly across César’s face. He agreed at once and ordered two glasses of the bar’s best

Armagnac to seal the bargain. Within a few months, César became one of the station's most productive reporting agents in East Beirut.

Prosser, whom César knew under the alias of Charles, was the third Agency case officer to handle him since his recruitment. Now he took a seat on the sofa and waited while the affable Lebanese laid a manila envelope between them.

"Yesterday I received the reports from both Jubran and Salim," César said. "There is much to tell you, Charles. Shall we go to my study?"

"No, let's stay here. If anybody comes to the door, I'll wait in the kitchen until you can get rid of them."

It was a beautiful morning, with the sky the deepest, clearest cobalt blue Prosser had ever seen. The study, he knew very well, was an airless, windowless cell. Under the circumstances, he saw no need to be overly meticulous about security.

"As you wish, *mon ami*," César replied "Shall we begin with Jubran, then? It is all written in his report, of course, but if you wish I can make a *précis* for you until you have time to translate it properly."

"Please do," Prosser answered, drawing a checkbook-size notepad and a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket.

César recited the highlights of Jubran's report. For the most part, it discussed the talks held aboard an Israeli gunboat three days before between the deputy director of the Mossad and the chief of Phalange intelligence. According to Jubran, a distant cousin of César who worked as a Phalange political organizer in the mountainous Metn district, the main item on the agenda had been the reconfiguration of Israeli military and intelligence assistance to the Phalange in exchange for the promise of American aid. The Lebanese wanted the Israelis to maintain current aid levels; the Israelis argued for cutbacks in areas where the Phalange could expect American aid. *So much for the secrecy of the Agency's newest liaison relationship*, Prosser thought as he listened to the report.

A second topic discussed aboard the gunboat was said to be a Phalange proposal for destabilizing the Syrian regime by delivering communications equipment and technical advice to the Muslim Brotherhood and other internal opponents of the Damascus regime. "If we want a war with Syria, we would prefer to launch it ourselves,"

the Mossad official had replied icily. He cautioned his Lebanese counterpart that if the Phalangists nonetheless mounted such a campaign on their own, the Damascus regime could be expected to respond with overwhelming force against Lebanese Christian population centers, most likely even worse than the summer-long shelling of densely populated Achrafiyé in 1978.

Finally César recited the main points of recent reporting from Salim, a major in the Phalange-dominated Lebanese Forces artillery, which laid out the order of battle of Lebanese Forces artillery units in the Kasrawan and Metn. When he had finished, he shuffled the papers into a neat pile and returned them to the manila envelope. “Now I will bring our coffee. After, I shall have a story to tell you.”

“Would you like me to help you in the kitchen?” Prosser offered.

“No, no, no, the coffee is all prepared. Please, relax.”

César disappeared into the hallway and returned promptly with a well-worn silver-plated tray and two demitasse cups filled to the brim with thick, cloyingly sweet Arab coffee. He placed the cups on the edge of the table in front of them and pushed the tray to the side. “Let me start by asking you a question, Charles. Has Edouard ever talked to you about how he and I began our work together?”

“I seem to recall that you and Ed met in our embassy’s consular section during the Events, when Ed was a visa officer. Is that correct, or do I have things mixed up?” Prosser recalled that “Edouard” had been the alias Pirelli used with César.

César ignored Prosser’s question and posed another of his own. “And do you know the reason why I visited your consulate?”

“For a visa, I would expect. Why else would anyone who isn’t an American citizen bother to stand in those outrageous queues for the privilege of talking to rude people hiding behind bulletproof windows?”

César disregarded Prosser’s attempt at humor and looked to the floor with a sadness that Prosser had never seen before in the usually jovial Lebanese. “How I wish the matter were as simple. I went to your consulate because I needed help in finding a missing person: Muna’s husband. You see, Muna married an American.”