

Chapter 1

Famagusta, Cyprus, July 1974

Morning was just taking shape—the sky was bright, but the sun hadn't risen yet, and the coast was covered with a predawn fog. As cool wind from the sea blew in through the window, the white lace curtains leaped up and for a moment slightly exposed the silhouettes of ships in the harbor and the blinking light of a lighthouse. With effort, Andreas threw back a light silk bedspread, rose slightly on his elbows and decided he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again, so he may as well get up. He had rarely slept well over the last two years, since the death of his wife, and in those five days since the coup, heavy thoughts hounded him almost constantly, day or night, keeping him from drifting off even for a few hours.

He slipped off the high bed and tossed on a thin Japanese dressing gown. The usual pain under his left shoulder blade immediately returned as soon as he made a few steps toward the window. He quietly cursed and took his heart drops from the nightstand. The time was so wrong for all this! Each moment was precious. He should have acted earlier, much earlier, about three months ago. Then it would have been much easier to sell vineyards and orange groves in the Mesaoria Valley. He shouldn't have listened to Mustafa, the guy was always overly cautious. Thank God, at least they had been able to make a deal before the coup, or they would have been kicking themselves now. Now the buyer had nowhere to go; all the money had already been transferred into a new trust account.

Andreas slowly staggered down the wide redwood staircase covered with soft dark red carpet. Everyone was still asleep in the house. Even old Athena, who usually got up first to sweep the paths in the garden and make breakfast for the masters, hadn't yet come out of her room on the first floor.

Andreas turned on the stove and put a small elegant teakettle with a curved spout on the burner. If only he could drink coffee! He had to give up this pleasure in recent weeks, his heart couldn't bear it. He would finish with the liquidation of his property here, in Famagusta, and then certainly go to London to the cardiologic clinic. He needed to meet Rosenfeld there as well, to sign the final draft of the trust. He just had to sell the hotel in time, before the real war starts!

The teakettle boiled. Andreas brewed his favorite Ceylon jasmine tea, added a little milk to a big porcelain mug and walked out to the patio, trying not to make noise or wake anyone. The garden met him with morning freshness and a gentle aroma of roses abundantly planted along the paths. He sat at a wooden table and smiled, noticing a doll in a magnificent pink dress on a chair. Soon Elena would wake up, run out into the yard and look for her favorite Kiki. She simply hadn't left the doll all week since he brought it to her from Kyrenia. Elena, his darling little girl! She was the entire meaning of his life, especially now, after his wife's death. Andreas crossed himself and kissed a gold cross, hanging on his neck. God was merciful to him, even though he provoked His wrath all the time, unable to restrain his rage and find forgiveness for his son. It didn't matter anymore that Panayotis hadn't become the son he was dreaming of, it didn't matter that he couldn't grasp anything in business, that he finished off his mother with his adventures. He gave him Elena, this light of life, his hope for the future. Everything would be just fine. He, Andreas, would take care of his granddaughter's future. She would never be in need. Even if he had to give up his precious creation, the hotel in Kyrenia, in which he had invested so many years and health.

Disturbing thoughts consumed him again. The treacherous pain under his left shoulder blade wouldn't leave him. He drank a little hot tea, held his breath, and leaned back in the chair. The day promised to be hot and sunny. But then again, could it be any different in July? How

many days did he have in stock? He had to quickly get in touch with Rosenfeld and consent to the latest price offered by the buyer. It was better not to think what would become of the hotel. He simply had to hope it would pass into good hands. Who knows, maybe in the future he would be able to buy it back?

It was a little after six. Too early to call Rosenfeld, and Mustafa was probably still asleep as well. A noise came from the street: muted cries, car honks. Something was going on. He had to listen to the radio. Andreas strained to get up and returned to the house. He heard voices from upstairs, a door slammed. What now? Could they have awakened his little girl? Andreas came up to the stereo on the console marble table in the living room and turned on the radio.

“Also, large quantities of paratroopers are continuing to descend. The territory to the north of Nicosia has endured heavy bombing. It is still difficult to estimate how many people were killed during the landing of tanks and troops from the military vessels near the northern shore of the island,” a stern male voice was broadcasting anxiously.

What troops? Why tanks? What's going on? Andreas grabbed the marble top of the table. The pain under his shoulder blade became unbearable. His breathing momentarily ceased. His legs gave way, refusing to hold the weight of his suddenly limp body. Sunrays were dancing in front of his eyes, and he slowly slid to the floor, unaware of what was going on. The last thing he heard before his consciousness, paralyzed by pain, finally faded was the voice from the speaker.

“We repeat this special report. Today, on the 6th of July 1974, at 5 a.m., Turkey attacked the Republic of Cyprus. Turkish troops have landed on the northern shore of the island, near Kyrenia.”

Los Angeles, August 2006

It was fifteen minutes past seven—dusk. The prospect of being late was growing by the minute, and Lisa started to panic. She had flown and traveled so many times, but had never been really late. This time she thought she had foreseen everything. The suitcase had been packed a day before, Brad had picked her up, as promised, at six thirty p.m., more than enough time to get to the airport. Why on earth had she agreed to take this route? Brad assured her it would be faster. Nonsense.

She turned on the car radio.

“Listen, Brad, this traffic is so slow! I’m really afraid of being late.”

“Don’t worry, Lisa. We still have time. I don’t know what’s going on today. The rush hour should be over by now. We’re almost to the interchange we need.”

“It’s L.A., Brad! The traffic is always bad here. I knew we should have taken a different freeway! Here, finally, the traffic radio.” She desperately needed to make that plane.

“Also,” a woman’s voice was spluttering, “there is a sizable traffic jam on the 105 right after the 605. And now to our current weather...”

“My God! Brad! We can’t stay here, let’s please get off, do something, I really—”

“Lisa, stop! I heard it. We’re staying on this freeway. It’s moving better now. We’ll be at the airport in half an hour, forty minutes maximum. Just relax.”

He sounded reassuring. Usually Brad didn’t panic like her, so maybe he was right?

Suddenly, a siren shrieked from behind. One police car, followed by another, swung by on their left like lightning.

“Jesus! I can’t believe it!” Brad sounded astonished. “An accident?”

Traffic was slowing down again. Lisa looked around. Her heart sank—the freeway was full of cars, trucks, and SUVs of all makes and colors. They were closing her in, tightening their grip on her, like in a horror movie. There was no escape!

“Can we do anything?” She tried to sound calm.

“Okay, okay, this is really bad, I get it. We’ll take the next off-ramp.”

They passed a sign *Central Avenue Next*. Brad forced his way through three lanes of cars full of angry honking drivers. His new VW obediently turned right and the insane freeway stayed behind. In a few minutes, they found themselves in the middle of some old, shady neighborhood.

Lisa sighed and looked around.

God knows where we are.

An old truck was half-blocking the road. Brad cursed as he found his way around it. The car clock was showing 7:35.

“Brad, where are we? I’m very worried.” Tears were slipping into her voice.

“I don’t know. It must be Compton. We’ll find a major street going west that connects to another freeway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I don’t know. Okay, I’ll stop and look at the map.”

Another stop! Lisa squeezed the purse in her lap.

Brad pulled up to the curb by a local park and started looking at his old map book. In the dusk Lisa could see a lawn and a sports field. She opened the window, and the unusual quietness seeped into the car. It seemed there was nobody in the park.

A dark BMW with its headlights on was parked near some nondescript building across the street. The driver, in baggy black jeans and a baseball cap turned sideways, was leaning on

the trunk, smoking and apparently waiting for someone. The car seemed out of place in this rundown neighborhood.

Brad was still studying the map, mumbling something incoherent. The guy by the BMW smashed the cigarette butt with the toe of his heavy boot and fished for a cell phone in the pocket of his baggy jacket. He looked at Brad's white VW and dialed a number. For some reason Lisa did not like it. Not at all.

"Listen, Brad, I feel really uncomfortable. Let's get out of here right away!"

She must have sounded really convincing. Brad quickly put the map away and started driving up the street.

"Don't worry, Lisa, I found the way to Rosecrans, and it will take us all the way to the freeway we need. We'll be fine."

Lisa turned back to look at the BMW. The driver was staring at their rapidly distancing car and saying something into his cell. Before he disappeared behind the turn, it seemed to Lisa he was dictating some letters. She felt cramps in the pit of her stomach.

It must be Brad's license plate! Oh, God, we've stepped into something. We've run into some thugs. Like we really need this! Now what?

In a couple of minutes they turned on to Rosecrans. The traffic was light, and they easily passed several pick-up trucks and small used cars.

Brad sighed with relief and put his hand on Lisa's knee.

"I told you, we'll be fine. In fact, it's even better to arrive a little later. There will be no line to check in!" He smiled one of his irresistible smiles that usually had such a strong effect on Lisa.

Usually, but not this time. Just then, two shiny black SUVs followed by a striking red low-rider dashed by them in the opposite direction. They heard loud rap music from their open windows. The passenger in the back seat of the red Cadillac looked out of his window and stared at their white VW. He had on the same baseball cap as the BMW driver by the park. Something metallic glinted in his hand.

In the looming darkness, Lisa saw the lights of a big highway ahead.

“Brad, is that the freeway we need?” she asked quietly.

Brad laughed and patted her knee. “No, silly. It is the 110, and we need the 405. It’s a bit further.”

Suddenly, she heard tires squeal behind them. The red low-rider was breaking and started to make an abrupt U-turn. It was still a good distance away.

“Listen, Brad, I know it sounds nuts, but I have a very bad premonition. We need to take the 110. It connects to the 105 which also goes to the airport, right? So please, trust my intuition. Remember, I’m a Pisces.”

“Lisa, what are you talking about? We are late!” But he still slowed down and turned to her with a question in his eyes.

“Listen, I beg you, do what I say – take 110!” She raised her hand, as if asking for mercy before he could object. “I know, I know, 405 is a straight way, and I am offering a round-about route,” she raised her hand once again. “It’s very, very important. You didn’t pay attention. It’s okay, the main thing is we really have no time. No time even to think, so let’s do it this way. I’m being late for the plane, so I’ll decide. And I’m responsible for the consequences as well.”

“But I don’t get it, Lisa, what’s come over you?” He hit the steering wheel in anger. “We are on the right road, we still have enough time, but if we start playing your games now, then

we'll be late for sure, and again I'll be to blame." He turned away from her and stared in the dark window.

Lisa knew: sometimes it was simply necessary to listen to one's intuition, inner voice, guardian angel, or whatever else was screaming inside her at that particular moment. If this was audible only to her alone, then she had to take extreme measures. By now they were approaching the freeway on-ramp. She grabbed the lapel of his sports jacket and whispered very firmly.

"Just take that on-ramp, or let me drive, understand? Just do it, damn it!" She was surprised at herself, but simply knew it was right, and that was it.

Brad was stunned and visibly shaken. He had not expected such a reaction.

"Okay, okay, we'll do it, please calm down."

The car swung to the right and started to speed up the on-ramp. Lisa looked back. The trailing red Cadillac flew by the on-ramp. She tried to suppress her violent heartbeat.

"Please, forgive me, Brad, and don't be offended. It's nothing personal. Just drive faster. Maybe I'm not right, but I felt, just felt it, do you understand? That the guy in the dark BMW by the park dictated your license plates to somebody."

"What for? Who needs it?"

"I don't know, Brad, but I think we accidentally stumbled upon a secret gang meet-up, and they didn't want to take chances. I think the red low-rider Cadillac was following us. Anyhow, I hope, I'm not right."

"Maybe you are right. I saw that red car and didn't like it either. Thank God we are on the 105 now and the traffic is moving. "Don't worry, we'll make it." There were notes of determination in his voice. Lisa glanced at her watch. Ten minutes after eight. They must make it!