

Chapter One

Beirut - November 1981

The taxi skidded on the wet road as the driver rammed the gas pedal down to the floor. Bursts of machine-gun fire shot out like thunderclaps from the Jeep close on its tail. Its driver leaned on the horn. "He's going to hit us!" Rasha shrieked. The persistent honking and rat-tat-tat sent her heart racing. Her knuckles blanched on the door handle. She sank low in the back seat pleading with the taxi driver to get out of the Jeep's way. They were trapped in an alley. Parked cars choked it on either side. The driver saw an opening and rode the battered Mercedes over the curb. The car bucked and bounced. The exhaust pipe came loose with a rattle. The pile of books next to her flew off the seat and scattered on the floor of the car. Rasha was flung sideways, but she held on tight to the door handle. She felt her shoulder snap. A searing pain darted down her arm. The Jeep screamed past them. Wild-eyed militiamen clung to its sides, the butts of their Kalashnikovs wedged against their hips, firing, firing. Among them Rasha saw a boy, face too young to shave, standing legs apart in the back of the Jeep, machine gun blazing, smiling with all his teeth.

Even when they were in the clear, Rasha's pulse pounded, almost audibly, in her neck.

The driver looked at her in the rear-view mirror: "Are you okay, miss?"

She nodded, the words caught in her throat. Her eyes locked with his. Five minutes ago they were total strangers. Now they had shared a brush with death.

The short route home from the university was an interminable labyrinth of blind corners and stretches of ashen streets. Rasha did not move a muscle, seized by the prolonged aftermath of a chilling incident that had lasted a few minutes at the most. The ringing in her ears; the caustic smell of fear that burned her nostrils; a distorted perception that made familiar surroundings unrecognizable and hostile; all sapped her of what little resilience she had left. Rasha could've sworn she had held her breath from the second the first volley of shots rang out to the moment the taxi pulled into the parking lot of her building.

Fingers trembling, she fished out the fare from her wallet. She tipped the driver generously, in effect putting a value on her life of no more than a few liras.

"God be with you," he said, reaching over to open the door for her.

She stepped out into the twilight. Wobbly legs somehow carried her into the building and up four flights of stairs to the apartment. Trying hard to steady her hand, it took a couple of attempts before she managed to fit the key into the keyhole. Her mouth was dry as chalk but the urgency to take refuge in her room stopped her from going into the kitchen where her mother would be preparing dinner with Umm Samir the housekeeper.

She had rounded the corner to the passage and made it halfway to her bedroom when her father's voice boomed from the family lounge.

"Rasha!"

"Yes, Baba." Reluctantly, she backtracked and stood in the doorway.

"You're late." He sat in his *'abaya*, the newspaper splayed before him in the faint light of a battery lamp set on low.

"I'm sorry, I had a faculty meeting. Mama knew about it." She leaned against the doorjamb, her legs about to give way, the books digging into the crook of her arm.

Amin glanced at the grandfather clock as it chimed once. "It's five-thirty," he said flatly.

"A few teachers were running late. I couldn't phone to let you know. The lines were down because of the power failure."

He scrutinized her over the rim of half-moons. "What's the matter? You look pale."

"Just tired. I still have papers to grade so if that'll be all Baba . . ."

A brisk nod before he returned to his newspaper.

Rasha raced to her bedroom and shut the door behind her. She threw her handbag and files on the bed. Her arms were numb, as if disjointed from the rest of her body. Nausea welled up in her throat. Her legs finally buckling underneath her, she collapsed on the edge of the bed, rested her head in cupped hands and wept.

The tears eased her shock and lingering terror. But there was work to do. Harrowing, life-threatening incidents were commonplace in war-torn Beirut, too frequent to dwell on. Another deadly day in the Paris of the Middle East was coming to a close.

Depleted, she willed herself to her feet, retrieved the file of essays and made her way to the desk. She slumped in the chair, her head dead weight against a tight fist. But the letters danced on the page, and the dismal light shed by the battery lamp on the English 201 essay did nothing if not add to her despair. The pen she held in her free hand swept across the paper of its own volition, mechanically.

“It was a great tragedy.” She crossed out the “j” in thick red, scribbled a “g” and the editorial symbol for “insert” in the margin—a pointless addition when she knew that its significance would be lost on Youssef, the student in question. Why she constantly engaged in such exercises in futility was beyond her. If she were to tilt her head ever so slightly, she would see it, in sharp focus, right there on her bookcase: a reminder of an ambitious project stifled at birth, physical proof of her limitations.

For three years now her proposal to introduce a course on “Islam in English Literature” has been wedged, untouched and discarded, between Gibran Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

She had researched and toiled over her idea for months. She had reviewed the objectives and curriculum to ensure the proposal was watertight. She had proofread her final draft until her eyes glazed over. So the day she was called to the dean’s office—a day still vivid after three years—she had had every reason to be hopeful.

“Quite a thorough proposal you put together, Rasha.” The dean intertwined his fingers over the piece of work, giving her a stiff half-smile. She waited, expressionless.

“But . . .”—There it was, the blow— “and despite its merits, faculty members feel that, under the circumstances, it would be unwise to start up any course with a religious content.”

“What I’m proposing, sir, is an overview of Islam in a literary sense . . .”

He held out a hand, stopping her in her tracks. “The country’s in flames over political and religious issues, Rasha. You cannot bring reason or hairline distinctions to bear here.” He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Besides, and please don’t take this as a reflection on your performance so far, your bachelor’s degree does not in fact qualify you to teach literature courses. University policy, I’m afraid.”

“I’m aware of that, sir.” Rasha shifted in her seat as if to displace the stab to her ego. “But since most of the qualified professors have left the country, I thought the university would be prepared to make an exception.”

“All the more reason why we should uphold our standards. We cannot allow the war or any goings-on outside this campus to dictate how this university is run. I’m sorry.”

For a brief moment, she considered pointing out that the violence and infighting that had gripped the country had in fact repeatedly infiltrated the ancient stone walls of the institution. She could cite countless incidents of student clashes and demonstrations, suspension of classes due to skirmishes, targeted shelling that claimed the lives of faculty, staff and students. She fought back the urge to debunk his notion, sadly a pervasive one, that integrity was an impregnable bastion against artillery. For the dean’s rebuff was all-too-familiar in an atmosphere of contradictions, malevolence and double standards. It was an attitude that had plagued Rasha’s life on both the professional and personal levels since the outbreak of the war: the more she challenged the status quo, the more intractable it seemed to become. Those averse to taking up arms, she concluded, could only combat the upheaval in their country by

clinging to their high morals in the hope that righteousness would triumph over the forces of evil. It was this belief that condemned Rasha to teaching an introductory and unchallenging course on the English language. That, and the turn of events at home that forced her to obey her father's wishes and give up her dream to pursue a master's degree.

As she leaned back in her chair, her gaze strayed to a year-old picture of Zahra on the pinboard above her desk. There stood her great-aunt between Rasha and her brother Karim at the entrance to their father's childhood home in a small village near Tripoli. Behind them, the fig tree whose purple fruit she and Karim feasted on during their occasional trips to the village. Zahra, diminutive and shrivelled up with age, the shadow of a smile on her face, stared back at her with moist eyes, pips in disappearing sockets. Four months after the picture was taken, her frail little body was found splayed out like a rag doll in a pool of blood on her front porch. Zahra became a statistic of war. The number of villagers who were massacred was too vast for newspapers to list each by name. As crimes of brutality piled on in the war of attrition, the survivors of that raid, once forgotten, were left to grapple with their ghosts unaided, haunted by the lacerating visions of that fateful day.

The muezzin's keening rose against the rumble of mortars in the distance. Rasha stroked the scar across her left eyebrow as was her habit when she got agitated or sank into contemplation. She thought of Paris. The normality of life beyond Lebanon seemed so surreal that any recollection of it filled her with unbearable sadness.

She sauntered up to the window in a trance and pushed the curtain to one side. With a pang of nostalgia, she recalled a time when her desk was strategically positioned against that wall so that, in a moment of reverie, she could let her eyes wander through an animated reel of a bustling neighbourhood across to the cyan expanse of the Mediterranean. At the time, even though she was confined to her room, the activity beyond it would rise and stream in with all its sounds and colours breathing life into her dull existence. They were visceral moments, when she imagined herself to be the young woman decked out in evening dress hailing a taxi, the child behind a low wall hoping not to be discovered in a game of hide-and-seek, one of two lovers communicating with furtive hand gestures across balconies.

Then, one summer afternoon, she had got up to answer the phone just as an ear-splitting explosion sent a spray of glass and shrapnel flying across her desk onto the blue carpet. A close call, one of many during the war, that dissolved her bones to marrow and left a metallic aftertaste on her palate. Incidents of the kind underscored the bitter truth that her fate actually lay in the bloodied hands of mortals—that she, like other bystanders, clawed at the ragged edge of survival.

Now, she looked out into the sinister void as darkness eclipsed the city of Beirut. Streets shimmering with streaming headlights were a thing of the past. The pleasant calls of corn sellers and the boisterous exchanges of neighbours dim echoes in her yearning mind. The bustling, exciting capital, a fading memory. What she beheld right then was a chilling tableau of wartime: faceless shadows, thrown up by the flicker of candlelight and battery lamps, scampering in stacked apartments of shredded buildings.