

Chapter 1 ~ Incirlik

Thursday, 20 September 1973 – Adana, Turkey

The way the guy examined me caught my attention right away. Don't know if it was my nerves or a paranoid reflex, but his deep-set predator eyes lingered a little too long for comfort. He stood on the tarmac at Adana's civilian airport, off to the side of the portable boarding ramp. Had that look, muscular broad shoulders, thick face with a groomed mustache. Not a thug, but a tough guy nevertheless. Perhaps a security type. One thing for sure, he wasn't with the local tourist bureau.

I hustled down the stairs from the Turkish Airlines jet and avoided eye contact. His focus wasn't solely on me, he gave each passenger the same treatment, but the way he gave me a practiced once-over was disconcerting.

The afternoon flight from Frankfurt had been uneventful until we touched down in Ankara. My normal sense of caution intensified when I passed through customs and immigration. Maybe I was suspicious for no reason, but they seemed to give me an unusual level of attention. The officer at the desk called his superior over. The grim official subjected my papers to a thorough examination and waved me through without comment. A scheduled one-hour layover stretched into two before a smaller jet took flight south to Adana.

The time was 1910, an hour after sunset. I collected my baggage and headed outside. The tough-guy stood on the curb. No Air Force bus was in sight. Not wanting to hang around, I hailed a taxi. Out of the corner of my eye, I detected a flick of the man's head. A taxi moved from out of line and pulled up in front of me.

The longhaired driver, a thin man about my age, rushed around and stashed the bags in the trunk. Told him to take me to Incirlik Air Base and I slid in the back seat. Moments later, he opened the throttle and we sped away towards the city.

The driver tried to steer me to a local nightspot. "You go disco club, belly dancer, good raki." Assumed he got baksheesh for bringing in customers, especially unsuspecting American servicemen.

Been there, done that. "The airbase — I want to go to Incirlik — No club."

He gestured with his hand, trying to imitate the sensuous curves of a belly dancer. "Much good, you like," and trilled a monotonous tune replete with fake finger cymbals.

This wasn't my first time in Adana. The place was nothing special, not exotic like Istanbul. Earlier trips to the nearby facility had been on missions from NSA, the National Security Agency, flying on Air Force SIGINT aircraft. Back in the sixties, I served a year at TUSLOG Det-4 field station in Sinop on the Black Sea. Turkey was familiar territory.

Maybe it was my threads attracting so much attention: a yellow leisure suit more suited for a disco. My ex-girlfriend picked it out in a trendy shop in Frankfurt. First realized wearing the outfit was a mistake during the layover at Ankara airport. I stood out like a pimp at a church picnic. My travel orders had specified civilian attire and supplied a ticket on a civilian airline, not something I expected.

The trip itself was unexpected. Yesterday, at my Army unit in Germany, I awaited the approval of my request for an early out. I was fed-up with the Army. They screwed me over, and now they could take it and stuff it where the sun don't shine.

I planned a six-week motorcycle tour down to the Riviera, followed by a trip home to a dream job with a civilian contractor at the Army Electronic Proving Ground at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Years of hardship and long-hours in the Army were about to pay off.

Unfortunately, with only three months to go on my enlistment, reality slapped me upside the head. Eleven years in the military, traveling the world collecting and analyzing critical electronic intelligence, meant nothing.

Captain Parker's edict still rung in my ears. "Denied."

Instead of a coveted early out, I received orders to a so-called special detachment at Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey. Seemed too spur of the moment. Something didn't add up. Little did I realize it was the first step in the inevitable journey that awaits the unlucky.

I wasn't responding to the driver's pitch, so he offered something different. "You no like club. Go Kerhane." He raised his right hand and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "Is good?"

"Hell no, I want to go to Incirlik airbase."

The last place I wanted to go was the Kerhane, a Turkish woman's prison where the inmates could work off their jail time in the brothel compound.

The driver continued his blather and veered off towards a seedy part of Adana. Sometimes a little voice tells you trouble is coming — an instinct, the best detector of danger. If it doesn't feel right, it's probably not. This didn't feel right.

"Yes, yes, disco, raki, belly dancer, much good."

"Wrong way — I want to go to Incirlik — hell with your club."

Undaunted by my protestations, he cut a sharp left and slowed in the middle of a darkened side street. Three silhouettes, illuminated by his headlights, sauntered out from the curb. Appeared to be young thugs and the tallest raised a hand for the taxi to halt. The driver didn't seem surprised or concerned, but I was.

Four to one wasn't what I considered good odds, especially in unfamiliar surroundings on a dark street. My pulse raced in anticipation. Wasn't sure if I was on the way to a robbery, beating, or kidnapping. In any case, it wouldn't end well. I'm not a violent person, but I slipped out my switchblade and held it ready with thumb on the slide. The vehicle crawled to a stop. The thugs split up to surround the taxi.

Instinctive reactions drive the first seconds of danger: fight, flight, or freeze. In a split second, the animal instinct for survival kicked in. I decided to get the hell out of there before the thugs gained the upper hand. The driver I could deal with.

The driver flinched and froze when he heard the unmistakable click. A half-second later, I grabbed a tuft of hair and pressed five inches of fine Solingen steel against the side of his neck. He made a slight nervous jump. His halting breath reeked of cheap cigarettes.

I growled in fractured German, "*Verstehen Sie? Incirlik — schnell.*"

That caught his attention. Lots of Turks work in Germany. For added motivation, I pressed hard, breaking the skin below his right ear, hard enough to draw blood. He recoiled in a contortion of pain. In the rearview mirror, his eyes glowed electric with panic.

The rear door opposite started to open. A silhouette appeared at the other window.

I punctuated my command, "*Airbase jetzt, schnell,*" with an unambiguous twist of the tip of the blade.

He stomped the gas and burned rubber. The fender brushed against one of the thugs. The door slammed shut as he swung a U-turn and raced away towards the base. I shifted in the seat and gave a cautious peek through the rear window.

Back on the main street, we merged into a chaotic jumble of evening traffic: cars, trucks, busses, motorcycles, pedestrians, and the occasional donkey. He slowed to keep pace. My heart continued at race speed.

"We go straight to the airbase, you understand?" He didn't respond. I upped the volume, yelling in his bleeding ear, "*Verstehen Sie, Incirlik*"

"Yes, yes, Incirlik *schnell.*"

A block before the bridge, traffic ground to a halt with us beside a bus. When it began to move, he unwittingly killed the engine. I squeezed his shoulder and leaned up close. The coppery smell of blood saturated the air.

"The last thing I want to do is cut your throat. But remember this, I will if you don't get moving — *schnell*." Wasn't sure if he understood English, but a firm jab gave all the translation he needed.

Desperate, he cranked the motor with no results. Horns honked, pedestrians gawked at our predicament. My body tensed as I considered my limited options. At last, the motor turned over, the cabbie popped the clutch, and we accelerated away.

The ride to Incirlik was nerve-racking — particularly for the weasel-faced taxi driver — I held the blade behind his ear for the duration. I kept my eyes on his eyes in the rearview mirror, giving him a poke when he seemed to waver. A trickle of crimson blood oozed from the cut, staining the wide floppy collar on his already filthy paisley shirt.

Less than an hour on the ground and already I had been given the once-over by a security type and now this. It didn't feel like a random hijack, the driver had to be in on it. A flicker of concern crept in. Experience taught me such confrontations are unpredictable. I considered myself lucky. The encounter could have easily deteriorated into a deadly fiasco. I refocused and resolved to stay calm but alert.