

*Prologue*

*It seemed like such a good idea. Graduation looming, time to leave our little island of privilege, the sheltered college for women in Westchester north of New York City. But what next?*

*The expectation was marriage. Alien (almost) as joining a convent, another career choice available, one embraced by some of our classmates. We, pal Jean and I, wanted no part of home sweet home, baby makes three, life in the suburbs. This was not based on any deeply held conviction about the status of women and their inferior role in marriage and society. We wanted to escape, that was it. Jean had more serious reasons as I would come to find out, but this is what propelled us.*

*This and Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, the final book published in 1960, the year before we graduated. There, in black and white, a blueprint for adventure. We could go to the places he described! Why not? Alexandria, of course, and Cairo. And how far can that be from Beirut, the Paris of the East? What about Damascus too—perhaps a conversion like Saul's? (Unlikely.) And Athens, the cradle of democracy. We both sought more. Neither of us could have explained what that might be although we spent many hours discussing it.*

*Now, today, I close my eyes and am instantly back. If I let myself remember Andreas, the sun-drunk sea of Greece, that feeling of freedom, of being lifted out of myself, young, tearing into the wind, it all comes rushing back. Ecstasy. Knew it then. New then.*

*The scent of lemons, the trembling hand on my skin, the smoke of kebobs in the souk, a muezzin's cry, the clutch of dust and sand at my throat ...*

*PART ONE*

*January 1962*

*Out of Beirut in a Hurry*

“Jean, stop scrabbling around in your bag like a drunk squirrel! There’s a checkpoint up ahead. Lots of uniforms and they don’t look friendly.”

Tearing along the bleak coast road in a banged-up taxi on the way to the airport, the same road we’d taken to La Gondola for lunch a few weeks back, past mounds of mud and sand littered with refuse, our last chance to get out of Beirut, a driver who spoke no English, or French for that matter, and so jumpy he might dump us anywhere and take off leaving us stranded.

“I can’t find my passport!”

*No passport.* They would search us for sure. Carrying letters to King Hussein, so we were told, no idea what they said. Stuffed in our bras, hidden in lingerie in our luggage. No Arab would go there. And yet fingering our underwear hadn’t bothered them in the slightest when they’d stormed in and arrested Asif. Pointing machine guns at the three of us. Days ago, yet in a way a lifetime.

“If I can’t find it, you go on.”

“Oh, sure. Think about what you’re saying. Carrying messages we can’t read to people we don’t know ...

The driver hit the brakes, cursing and calling on Allah at the same time. As we slid off the seat, I got a glimpse of the sea sparkling in the sun.

“Got it!” Jean yelled, holding her passport aloft.

*“Ahlan wasahlan. Going somewhere?”* The man peered through the window at us sprawled on the floor. Rotting teeth, bits of gold filling flashing, comical more than menacing. Except for the gun.

“Airport?” Jean said.

We pulled ourselves up. More soldiers crowded the car. They yanked out the driver and shoved him in the direction of the makeshift command post in the middle of the road.

“Passports!” We handed them over.

They passed them around, a great show of examining and comparing photographs

with our faces. Two marched off with them, while the others milled around or squatted, smoking and talking. Our driver had vanished. We checked our watches. If they kept this up it would be a close call making our flight.

“Do they think we’ve got all day to sit here admiring the scenery?”

“Why don’t you march on up there and tell them we’ve got a plane to catch. Take Toothless with you.” All this was her fault. Or was it mine for suggesting we come here in the first place?

“Was that supposed to be sarcastic?”

“A great weapon, sarcasm, when scared shitless. Which, quite frankly, I am.”

“Okay, I know I’ve been a little cavalier ... but ... what do you think they’re doing?”

I didn’t want to hear any “but.” What about that empty room at the hotel we just fled, the St. Georges? That odious General Osir coming down the hall? Afraid, then, for Asif. Now convinced he’d given us all the slip, even the wily Osir.

“What will they think we’re doing?”

“Joyriding around out here, what else? What kind of stupid question is that?”

She kept at it. “What if we miss the flight? Can’t be that many to Amman. And they said the airport was going to be shut down, we’ll be stuck.”

“Jean. Stifle the ‘buts’ and ‘what ifs.’ We can’t let on we’re nervous so let’s talk about something else. God, it’s hot.”

The sun was high, nothing to shade us on the side of the road. Not a single car had passed. The soldiers came back, without our passports. One of them opened the door on Jean’s side and motioned her to get out.

“No!” she said. “Why ... why me?”

He motioned again, impassive. She squeezed my hand. Murmured something I didn’t understand. When she climbed out of the taxi, she tried to take her handbag. He threw it back inside. They disappeared into the command post.

So this was it. They would question us, her first, then me, smack us around, take us back to Beirut to one of those jails the prince had described. Leave us there to rot, nobody to know or care what happened. Gone.

Fear rolled over me in waves, along with the heat, the nausea. I started to sweat. I

lit a cigarette, hands shaking. I stuffed it out. What was I thinking? I could hardly breathe as it was. What were they doing in there? What doing to her? What should I do? Force back the tears to begin with, I would not give them that satisfaction.

Damn Asif. And damn our own stupidity. How could he do this to us? I knew he couldn't be trusted, had felt it from the very beginning. More and more as things didn't add up and Jean got more and more infatuated. The two of them always whispering, all so mysterious. They thought I didn't notice? I just didn't say anything and now look where we were.

That was a scream. Quickly muffled. No mistake, a woman's scream. I had to get in there. I gripped the handle of the door and struggled to get it open. A soldier jumped up and slammed it shut. He didn't look at me. He went back to squat with the others, silent, smoking, working their worry beads. For the first time in a long time I prayed. Not for the first time I wanted more than anything to go home.