

Prologue

Beirut, Lebanon

The Attack

It was both a curse and a blessing that directly across the street from the American Embassy was a damn good bakery store. Every morning that Amelia Stenton entered the store, the tempting display in the store beguiled her senses with its delicious aromas. Admittedly, the embassy's canteen was rich in Western meals. It also served delicious, light and nutritious salads for the diet Amelia had been forcing herself to follow for a few months. But it was the oriental pastries that had her hooked. Especially the *Maamoul*, which Amelia bought three a day at the bakery. The semolina balls the size of golf balls had a date filling. Amelia had vowed to take better care of her figure, but hell – this stuff was too good to pass up. After all, she'd already lost five pounds in the last three months. Tony would make eyes when she returned to Washington in three weeks. For him alone, she'd put herself through this damn exercise program. She spent an hour a day in the gym in the embassy basement. Every day, seven hours a week she toiled and toiled. All of this she did to fit back into her summer clothes, which had become too small for her about a year ago, especially around the hips.

It hadn't escaped her notice that Tony had taken disfavorable note of the few extra pounds she had accumulated over the past nine months. But what could she do? She was an assistant to a diplomat at the Lebanese Embassy – a desk job by any standards. With the temperatures in the Middle East, a daily jog, as she used to do in Washington, was out of the question. In the evenings, the temperatures were somewhat bearable, but the area was just too unsafe to go out on her own.

However, the gym she had been torturing herself at for the past quarter was having an effect. When Amelia stood naked in front of the mirror in the morning, she noted with satisfaction each time that her belly had become noticeably flatter, her legs narrower, and her buttocks firmer. Tony would be pleased. Since her boss, Ambassador McTompkin, had taken up a post in Beirut, limited to twelve months, she had accompanied him, Amelia and her boyfriend only saw each other for two weeks every three months. A first, real test for their young love – they had barely been together two years when she had traveled to Beirut. But soon it was over. Three more weeks, and McTompkin would be back in Washington working and Amelia would be back too. Three weeks, and she'd be through this hellish heat. The heat and the fear of Tony screwing his way through half of Washington in her absence.

As she did every morning, Amelia sat down at her desk at eight o'clock sharp – a room with five desks that she shared with the other assistants. The blinds on the large windows were already down to keep out the building heat that would soon settle over the city like a dome. Amelia was the first in the office. She quickly tied her dark, long hair into a bun, opened her appointment book, and brought up

Ambassador McTompkin's schedule for today. At one o'clock, he would participate in a conference call, along with U.S. Secretary of State William Hennigan and a representative of the Lebanese government. Preparing for this phone call would take Amelia's entire morning.

At just before ten, while she was putting together a dossier for McTompkin, he finally showed up at the embassy. A short, roundish, balding man, he was already sweating his guts out. Amelia liked him. McTompkin was a friendly, courteous representative of his guild. He was good-natured and appreciated the hard work Amelia was doing for him.

The ambassador disappeared into his office after a brief greeting and did not keep her from her work any longer. Finally, at a little before noon, she had finished the dossier. She brought it to McTompkin's desk, who thanked her and she immediately disappeared. Time for lunch.

Together with Norah, a cultural scientist working for the embassy, and Fatima, an interpreter, Amelia went to the canteen. She grabbed a small bowl of tuna salad and sat down at one of the tables with the other two.

"How's your cat?" asked Amelia, addressing Fatima. Two days ago Fatima had been late for work because her pet cat had run out into the street and been hit.

"Came through," Fatima replied curtly. "The hind legs are broken, but the vet said he'll fix it."

"Thank God," Norah said. Amelia knew Norah had been a frequent guest of Fatima's and had taken a fancy to the cat. They spent the rest of lunch making casual small talk and briefly analyzing the American gaming show they had watched via stream the previous evening. Finally, at a little before half past twelve, Amelia returned to her desk on the second floor of the embassy. She picked up the small paper bag containing the *maamoul* and popped one of the balls into her mouth – just then the door opened behind her and McTompkin's voice reached her ears.

"Amelia, can you help me a minute?" She nearly choked, and instead of answering, she just raised the thumb of her right hand above her head.

"What is it?" she asked as she closed the door of McTompkin's office behind her, the paper bag still in her left hand. The ambassador was back behind his desk, looking at the dossier with a furrowed brow.

"I just can't get those two names past my lips," he said.

"Which ones?"

"These," he replied, pointing to a spot in the dossier as Amelia walked around the desk. Just as Amelia was standing next to him, glancing at the names in question, she heard McTompkin sniff.

"What ... what smells so delicious?"

"I ... what?" asked Amelia, irritated. The ambassador jutted his chin toward the bag she was holding.

"What do you have in there? That smells fantastic."

"Oh," she said, laughing. "Those are maamoul. A pastry. Don't you know it?" He shook his head.

"Would you mind if ..."

"No, absolutely not," she said quickly, holding the bag out to him. "Please." McTompkin dropped his chunky hand into the bag and pulled out a semolina ball. He sniffed it and then ate it.

"Oh my God," he said with his mouth full, chewing with relish. "This ... this tastes great. Where did you get this?"

"From the bakery across the street."

"Really?" Amelia nodded.

"In that case ..." he glanced at his watch. Twenty-five minutes to go before the conference call begins.

“Could you possibly ...” He didn't finish the sentence – he probably already knew what Amelia's answer would be – and instead dug his wallet out of his jacket.

“Of course,” Amelia said, unable to suppress a grin.

“We'll take care of those unpronounceable names in a minute,” he assured her.

“I haven't eaten anything yet, and ... damn, those things might be the most delicious pastry I've ever had.” Now Amelia laughed.

“I'll be right back,” she said, walking through the office door to her desk, picking up her purse – and pausing. With narrowed eyes, she pricked up her ears. What was that noise?

It was hard to hear over the noise of the large printer right next to her, which was working, but ... were they screams? Yes, for sure. The longer she listened, the more certain she was that she heard screaming from outside. What was going on? With quick steps, Amelia crossed the large office, went to the window and pushed apart two slats of the blinds. Her gaze searched the street in front of the embassy. Fact, there were screaming people running in all directions, apparently in wild panic. What was that all about?

“Meghan?” she called over her shoulder, waving one of the other assistants over. She was the only one present in the room and so far had not heard the noise outside because of the headphones on her ears. Even now she did not respond to Amelia's calls. Only when she gestured wildly in her direction did Meghan look up and remove the headphones.

“What's going on?” she asked.

“Come here a minute,” Amelia said tonelessly. She tried to suppress the fear that was building inside her right now. That didn't look good out there at all. Meghan rose and walked over to her colleague. As she peered through the window, the same worry Amelia felt was reflected in her face.

“We should let McTompkin know,” Meghan said. Amelia nodded.

“I'll go get him. Something's ... not ... right.”

She broke off. Her eyes had fallen on the flat roof above the bakery across the street. A man was climbing through the skylight there. In his hands he held something large and long. Something that looked suspiciously like ...

“Rocket launcher!” screamed Meghan in a voice that rolled over.

What happened next seemed to happen in slow motion. Without being able to move, Amelia saw the man on the roof rest the rocket launcher on his shoulder. He aimed for a brief moment, then pulled the trigger. The projectile moved toward the embassy building, trailing a looping trail of smoke. At the last moment, Amelia threw herself to the ground.

Then the missile hit the second floor. A tremendous bang sounded. The earth seemed to shake, window panes shattered. Meghan, who had not ducked and was still standing in front of the window, threw her hands up in front of her face and screamed. Shards pelted down on Amelia, who hid her head under her arms. After a few seconds, she looked around. Meghan was lying on the floor next to her, her face covered in blood. Several pieces of glass had ripped open her skin on her cheeks and forehead, but she didn't look seriously hurt.

“Shit, what's going on?” cried Meghan, wiping blood from her eyes.

“I don't know,” Amelia gasped. Behind them, the door flew open and McTompkin ran into the room.

“What in the world ...” he continued, but that was as far as he got. Another deafening explosion sounded, part of the outer wall on the second floor was simply torn away. Amelia just then saw

Meghan, who was standing right in front of the wall where the second missile had hit, being torn to shreds. The scream that caught in Amelia's throat escaped McTompkin's throat. The air was drenched with dust, fire and screams. Something big and hard hit her in the head. Everything went black.

"Amelia!" A voice penetrated her consciousness. Muffled. Barely audible. As if she had sound-absorbing headphones on her ears.

"Amelia!" Someone shook her.

"Amelia! Wake the fuck up!"

The next thing she felt was a resounding slap. Finally, she seemed to wake up from her trance. She jerked her eyes open, coughed, looked around. The office was completely destroyed. Black smoke hung in the air, the floor was littered with dust and debris. Cables and individual pipes hung loosely from the ceiling. Sparks flew through the air. In the far corner, next to McTompkins' office, flames blazed.

McTompkins, the ambassador squatted beside her, his round face covered in a thick layer of dust. His lip was bleeding, but otherwise he appeared unharmed. Amelia felt her forehead, from which a dull ache emanated. When she looked at her fingertips, she saw blood.

"We need to get out of here," McTompkins said, looking around the room in a panic. "Do you have your cell phone on you?" Amelia braced for a response, but only got out a dry cough. She shook her head. Her cell phone was in her purse. Somewhere under that pile of rubble.

"Damn it," McTompkins cursed. "Mine's in the office, and I can't get the damn door open. Goddamn it, Amelia, I think this was a terrorist attack. A fucking terrorist attack!" A question manifested before Amelia's eyes. She opened her mouth and croaked a few times.

"How ... how long ..."

"How long were you unconscious?" She nodded.

"Not long." McTompkin looked at his wristwatch.

"Maybe two minutes. Come on, I'll help you up. We've got to get out of here." Amelia flinched as a loud crackle sounded from the exposed cables in the ceiling. "Quick," said McTompkin, who had also winced. He grabbed her by the arm and waist and gently pulled her to her feet. They coughed and looked around. The air was almost impenetrable with smoke and dust. The lamps no longer worked, and the light coming in through the large hole in the wall was more blinding than helpful.

"To the door!" urged McTompkin. The ambassador seemed surprisingly calm considering the situation. Amelia was equally surprised at herself. She barely felt the pain of her throbbing head wound, and her mind was irritatingly clear and together. He pushed her through the destroyed office, clearing debris they couldn't cross, supporting her every foot of the way. "You're almost there," he said encouragingly. At last they had reached the door. "In two weeks, we'll meet for coffee and some maamoul, and this fucking shit will be over. You hear that, Amelia?" She nodded. On his graying cheek, she saw a tear eating its way through the dust like a storm surge through a dry riverbed.

"Are you ready?" Again she nodded. Ambassador McTompkin opened the door. If she could have, Amelia would have screamed. As it was, it was nothing but a dry, barely audible croak that escaped her as the two armed men rushed toward her. A sound that in its nothingness countered the image of terror that presented itself to them. The hallway down which the two men ran was littered with blood and corpses. The strangers wore dark clothing, their faces covered with red scarves. In their hands they held assault rifles. McTompkin gasped as he grabbed Amelia, pushed her backward and stood between her

and the men.

“What do you want?” he yelled in a shrill voice. “Let us go, please! We have ...”

A shot rang out, silencing the ambassador. Amelia watched in horror as he staggered two steps backward, turned to face her, returned her panicked gaze, pressed his hands to the bullet wound on his chest, and slumped. He lay on his stomach, his face buried in the dust. Only the hand of his outstretched arm was still moving. Groping its way across the floor, it got hold of Amelia's ankle and held onto it. She was unable to move. The two men were talking to each other in Arabic. They stopped in front of McTompkin. One raised his rifle and shot the ambassador in the head. Almost at the same moment, his grip on Amelia's ankle slackened, and she felt sick.

“Please,” she whispered, for she still could not speak. “Please. Let me go.” One of the men said something to the other, walking past Amelia into the ruined office. “I want to go home,” she whispered, as loud as she could. Her gaze met the attacker's. There was no pity in it. No compassion. Nothing at all.

“No survivors,” he said in broken English. Then he raised his rifle.