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DOC MILLINGTON

Beirut, March 1983

DOC MILLINGTON KNEW THE MOMENT HE LANDED that he'd made a mistake. But if he backed out or ran away, he'd be court marshalled.

The Major met him at the airport in his white U.N. jeep, his blue beret at a cocky angle. He showed no signs of having aged in the nine years since they'd served together in Egypt, after the Yom Kippur war. He still curled the ends of his mustache with clear mustache wax, and there was no trace of grey among the bristly auburn whiskers.

He navigated Beirut's potholed streets as if he were a teenager. The two of them had joked in Cairo about the need to be a dynamic driver, avoiding motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians as well as camels and sheep when navigating Egyptian roads. The streets leading away from the Beirut International Airport were much worse, ruined in places by heavy shelling. Vehicles had to drive on the curb or sidewalk. But the Major held the steering wheel with his left hand, leaving his right hand free to smoke.

"How is Helen?" he asked. "And the kids?"

"She filed for divorce soon after I got back from Cairo," Doc said. His neck muscles tightened. "She took the boys."

"Hard news." The Major took a long drag of cigarette. "How was the flight from Larnaca?"

It pained Doc to speak about Cyprus. He missed its abundance of palm trees and cheerful sunshine. Beirut in March was drab and grey. A misty chill entered his bones in the frigid, smoky jeep. There was no greenery anywhere—an eerie absence of trees. When he mentioned it aloud, the Major said they'd all been burned or destroyed by artillery fire and shelling over the last seven years of the civil war.

"Tensions are escalating," the Major said. "The city is divided into factions. Without the presence of a police force, we're needed all the more." He

launched into a briefing on the mission of the multinational force and the various areas where Doc would be expected to patrol, including the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. "It will be good to have a medic on staff," the Major said.

Doc stayed quiet. He should have refused when his commanding officer spoke of the urgent need for fifty more peacekeepers in Beirut. He could have invented a reason for staying on the Cyprus base, but he wasn't one to think quickly on his feet. And as a single man, he'd been expected to volunteer.

The Major rolled his window down as they drove along the Corniche. "Lucie can't get enough of the sea."

The wind blew hard across the water, causing Doc to shiver in his thin jacket. He should have thought to wear wool. He should have known there was a world of difference between Cyprus and Beirut, even though they were both on the Mediterranean.

"The Marines hosted Bob Hope on one of the ships last week." The Major gestured toward the five American warships with their cannons pointed at the city. "You just missed him. They invited all the peacekeepers." He crushed his cigarette butt into the ashtray, then lit another. "Would you like one?"

Doc didn't smoke, but he took one anyway, hoping it would calm his nerves. He felt like he'd smoked the equivalent of several cigarettes already, as the flight from Larnaca had gotten so smoky that the airline attendants had been unable to do the final beverage service.

The sewage smell coming from the garbage-strewn beach made him feel sick. Just that morning, he'd walked on the sandy beach in front of his hotel—a clean, white expanse that stretched endlessly next to the turquoise sea. But this beach looked like the city dump with mounds of garbage—even the carcass of a dead cow, its bloated belly turned up to the sky. Seagulls, crows, and vultures circled overhead.

"Looks like rain," Doc said, hating himself for talking about the weather.

"That's your building right there." The Major indicated a twelve-storey apartment building facing the sea. "You'll have a fine view. Fellow Canadians in the penthouse and on the sixth floor—plenty of company if you need it. But tonight, we'd like to have you for supper. Lucie made a *gigot d'agneau*."

“I’d love that.” He’d always been curious to see the Major with his wife and kids—a rare glimpse at a superior officer’s private life. He declined the Major’s offer to drop off his bags. He didn’t need to freshen up.

The Major veered the jeep to the right, leaving the sea behind. “I’ve got a couple of bottles of Liebfraumilch. You still prefer white over red?”

Doc was surprised the Major remembered. It had been nine years, after all. He was looking forward to dinner; he’d heard the Major say countless times that his wife was an exceptional cook. After years of restaurant food and microwave dinners, he welcomed the prospect of a home-cooked meal. He hadn’t had roasted lamb since Hagar had cooked it for him in Egypt.

No, he wouldn’t allow himself to think about Hagar. The tension in his neck crept into his right shoulder.

“How are your kids making out?” He remembered the faces of a school-aged boy and a tiny, fair-haired girl in a frame on the rosewood table that had separated his bed from the Major’s in the room they’d shared in Cairo.

“They’re fine,” the Major said. “We’ve got them at the American Community School in West Beirut. It takes them an hour to walk there and back, but they like it better than the correspondence courses they were doing in Israel.”

Doc couldn’t imagine raising children in this mess of a city—the BBC was calling it a hotbed—but the Major had already moved on to the topic of French and Belgian pastry shops. He’d pulled a map out of the jeep’s glove compartment and was tracing a path from the Corniche to Hamra Street. The Major had always had a passion for maps and had even made one of their compound in Egypt with the building and garden drawn to scale.

Doc’s eyes wandered down the map to the Hezbollah-controlled area where he was expected to patrol. TV images of the September massacre filled his mind: bodies piled up in the alleys, a newborn stuck to the wheel of a tank. He’d lost count of how many foreign journalists and diplomats had been kidnapped and held for ransom since then. He took a long inhale of cigarette that set him to coughing.

“You need some refreshment,” the Major said. “Something to liven you up. It’s a short drive from here to our apartment.”

Doc smoothed his hands over his wrinkled shirt. He could smell the body odour seeping through the cotton. He’d have to keep his jacket on during dinner if he wanted to make a good impression on the Major’s wife. He felt like he knew her, after handling her letters to her husband. For the

entire six months, she'd written her husband weekly letters on blue airmail stationery with loose, loopy handwriting that he'd imagined matched her carefree yet loyal personality. Not all the officers were that lucky, Doc knew, since it had been one of his duties to sort through the contents of the mail-bag each week.

The Major kept her letters in the top drawer of the rosewood bedside table. He read them each night before bed, the way other men read novels or magazines.

Doc had been tempted to read a few himself, on the sly, but the Major was very particular with his things. He kept an immaculate desk and always made his bed with military precision. He would be sure to discover if someone had tampered with his correspondence.

Doc was looking forward to hearing Lucie's voice and finally meeting her in person. The photo he'd seen was of a petite woman with a wide smile and thick chestnut hair, feathered like Farrah Fawcett.

The Major drove on the sidewalk to avoid the rusted carcass of a bombed-out car. "We're almost there," he said.

Doc regretted not asking to be dropped off at his apartment first so that he could shower and change. And he felt uncomfortable arriving empty-handed. He should have brought something from Cyprus—fresh oranges or olive oil—but his commanding officer had given him only twenty-four hours to get his affairs in order before boarding the plane.

"Let me buy some pastries for the family," he said.

The Major said the bakeries were all behind them but drove him to a small Lebanese grocery nearby and told Doc he'd wait for him in the jeep.

Doc selected a variety of baklava for the kids—unoriginal, but always a crowd pleaser. He didn't want to keep the Major waiting too long, but he needed to find something special for Lucie.

He pointed to a bottle of Cacharel's Anaïs Anaïs perfume, and the bearded shopkeeper put the box on the counter. But at the last minute, as he was handing over a pile of American bills, he had second thoughts. Perhaps perfume was too extravagant or intimate—a gift more suited for a wife or lover. He'd have to couple it with something more pedestrian. Some kind of food might be good, since that was Lucie's art form.

He surveyed the contents of the shop one more time. "What do you want?" the shopkeeper asked in Arabic.

Doc's mind went blank. It had been so long since he'd spoken that lan-

guage. “*Sayadieh*,” he said, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. It was his favourite Middle Eastern dish, and Hagar’s specialty.

The shopkeeper disappeared behind a bead curtain and returned with a huge red snapper. “*Samakat tazij*,” he said, tugging on his beard. “From Sarafand.”

Tazij—fresh—was one of the first words Doc had learned when shopping in Egypt.

The shopkeeper held up three fingers. “*Thlath*.” Three pounds, Doc guessed. Enough for a family of four. Lucie could cook it whole or ask the Major to cut it into fillets.

The shopkeeper ran his hand over the snapper’s metallic pink skin. He pointed at its clear, bright red eyes. “Very good,” he said in English.

“I’ll take it,” Doc said. He needed to get moving. The Major would have gone through several cigarettes by now.

In the jeep, he kept the wrapped fish and the sweets on his lap. The box of perfume fit into his jacket pocket.

“Lucie and the kids will be pleased,” the Major said, without enquiring what Doc had chosen.

They parked the jeep in front of the three-storey cement building and climbed the dusty stairs rather than using the elevator. “Lots of power outages here,” the Major said. “We don’t want to get stuck.”

The fish smell was starting to get to Doc. He regretted his hasty decision. Perhaps he should have told the Major about the perfume.

They climbed the last flight and turned the corner. It surprised Doc that the Major rang the bell on his own front door instead of walking in or unlocking it himself. The keychain he’d used in the car had at least a half-dozen keys attached to it.

“Lucie keeps the door bolted from the inside,” the Major explained while they waited for someone to answer. “For safety.”

It was the boy who opened the door—Etienne—who was no longer the schoolchild in the photo but a young man with an athletic build. He shook Doc’s hand with a firm grip. He had the Major’s brown eyes and easy confidence.

Lucie came up behind him, wearing an apron over her dress. Her hair wasn’t feathered like in the photograph. She wore it in a bob around her face.

The Major kissed her on the mouth, then introduced Doc and excused

himself, saying he wanted to change out of his uniform before dinner.

Lucie smiled warmly at Doc and leaned in to kiss him on both cheeks. “*Bienvenue à Beyrouth*,” she said. “It’s always nice to meet a fellow Canadian.” She was as charming as he’d imagined her, with a French accent that softened the hard edges of her English consonants.

He put the fish under his arm while he dug into his pocket for the bottle of Anaïs Anaïs. “For you.” He gave the box to Lucie. His body odour had intensified. He couldn’t stand it. He should have grabbed a clean shirt out of his suitcase before coming up.

He gave the baklava to the girl, who’d come to stand beside her mum. She still wore her hair in two thick braids. “I’m Doc Millington.” He wanted to stretch out his hand, but it was slimy from the fish wrapper. “You must be Tanya. I feel like I know you.”

The girl looked at him quizzically through her thick glasses.

“I shared a bedroom with your father for six months in Egypt,” he explained. “Yours was one of the last faces I saw every night before turning out the light.”

She smiled shyly, barely moving her lips.

“Back in ’74,” he added. “You were just a little thing.” He was babbling now. He shifted the fish so that he could hold it in both hands.

The girl was the only one in the family with blue eyes—cornflower blue, like the wildflowers that grew on the side of the TransCanada all the way from Calgary to Jasper.

Lucie opened the box of perfume. “Such a lovely, thoughtful gift,” she said, barely pronouncing the final “t” sound. She sprayed some on her neck and wrists. An intoxicating floral scent filled the foyer. He could make out lily of the valley with notes of jasmine, rose, and sandalwood—his favourite. For a moment, it obliterated the body odour and fish smells.

Lucie sprayed some on the girl’s neck. She offered to spray some on her wrists, but the girl refused. She tugged her long-sleeved grey shirt over her hands.

The boy, Etienne, was leaning against the thick, brown padding on the back of the door. It looked like a leather mattress. Doc had never seen anything like it.

“It’s bulletproof,” Etienne said. He opened it to show Doc the thickness. “Very heavy.”

A shiver ran up Doc’s back. “I brought you and your sister some pista-

chio treats, but next time I'll find you some Swiss chocolate." He hoped the boy hadn't noticed his fear. He looked so nonchalant, leaning against the door.

"Shall I take your package?" Lucie asked.

"It's a snapper," Doc said. He didn't want to put it in Lucie's hands. The floral perfume and the fish smell were an unhappy combination.

"*Merci beaucoup.*" Lucie eyed the package suspiciously. "I've not dared to buy fish here."

He hadn't thought about the polluted Mediterranean—only about the mouth-watering *sayadieh* that Hagar used to make him in an earthenware pot with rice and tahini on the side.

He unwrapped the snapper's head so that Lucie could see its red eye. "It looks healthy to me," he said. "The eye is still bright."

Etienne drew nearer. "Cool." Doc removed a bit more of the wrapper to show the brilliant pink scales.

"Is there a special way to cook it?" Lucie asked. "I didn't bring many cookbooks with me."

"I'll try to find you a recipe," Doc said. He liked having a reason to come back.

"I'll put it in the fridge." She reached over and took it from him before he had a chance to protest. He didn't want the slime getting on her hands, but she didn't seem to care. "We'll have to eat it in the next couple of days," she continued. "I'm cautious with fish. It can turn so quickly."

Tanya followed her mother into the kitchen. Etienne wandered off down the hall.

Doc washed his hands in the powder room and sat down on the couch to wait for the Major. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, then reached for the book on the coffee table—a stamp collection with the girl's name on the front—and studied its pages. He'd kept a collection all his adult life. It was soothing to organize and catalogue the tiny papers. He could spend hours labouring over his stamps.

A booming sound filled the room, like dynamite exploding. A sudden burst of light illuminated the dusk, followed by another thunderous boom. The chairs and coffee table jerked forward on the carpet. The lamps shook. Stamps flew out of the book and scattered. Doc scrambled to gather them all.

Doc walked into the kitchen—fragrant with the scent of roasted lamb—

just as another blast sounded. “What’s going on?” he said loudly. The dishes rattled in the cupboards. The lights flickered. A teacup toppled off its saucer and fell onto the floor, breaking into tiny pieces.

Lucie turned from the counter. “Not to worry,” she said. “Donald will join you in the living room.” She grabbed a dustpan and broom and knelt to sweep up the shards.

Doc settled onto a stool. How could she be so nonchalant? “I thought we could visit in here.” He tried to keep his voice steady. “That way, you can join us. And Donald and I can help you.” It was strange calling the Major by his first name.

The Major had his head in the fridge. He emerged with a bottle of wine, his hands cupped around the green bottle neck. “Nice and cold already.”

Lucie swept the broken shards into the wastebin. She smoothed her apron over her dress, releasing a fresh wave of sandalwood and lily. “I’ve got everything under control in here.” She smiled at the Major. “You two go and relax in the living room. You must be exhausted from your flight.”

“I’m not sure what happened just now, but the furniture shifted out there,” Doc said.

“The shelling starts around suppertime each night,” Tanya said. “As soon as it gets dark.” She pressed the fingers of her right hand into her left wrist. A thin line of blood was seeping into her grey shirt sleeve.

She must have gotten cut by a broken shard. “Let me have a look at that,” Doc said. It was best to prevent infection right away, and he’d be grateful for something to do, but Tanya shook her head nervously.

Doc gripped the long-stemmed glass the Major had given him. He wasn’t sure his stomach could handle wine. “How close is the shelling?”

“Hard to say,” the Major said. “We’ll know in the morning, when we get to headquarters. We can always call Villeneuve if you want to know sooner. He’s Intelligence, and he usually knows things before they happen.”

Another explosion, louder this time, lit the sky.

Doc jumped, spilling wine on his trouser legs. He ran his hand over his balding, grey head.

“Why don’t you men go through to the dining room,” Lucie suggested. “The kitchen is too crowded for four.”

Doc followed the Major, but he was reluctant to leave Lucie and the children behind.

Later, once they were all settled around the candlelit table, the questions began.

“Tell me about Cairo,” Lucie said. “I didn’t get to visit Don there.”

Doc froze—his fork mid-way to his mouth. Had the Major told her about Hagar? He tried to answer but couldn’t. He turned to the girl. “I remember when your father would call you on the ham radio. You had to say ‘over and out’ once you were done speaking, so the operator could transfer the line back, but you kept forgetting to say it.”

The girl looked at him, her eyes wide behind her thick lenses.

“It was terrible,” Lucie said. “It made her cry every time. We had to stop. We wrote letters instead.”

“I know,” Doc said. “I remember.”

He’d written Helen a few letters describing the U.N. compound and sent her a picture of himself frying an egg on the sidewalk, but she’d never responded. Neither one of the boys had written. Eventually he’d stopped writing too.

When he got back to his apartment on the Corniche, he didn’t unpack his suitcase, just left it on the chair in the bedroom. He desperately wanted to shower. His clothes stank of perspiration, fish, wine, and stale cigarettes.

He stripped and stepped into the marble-tiled shower, but when he turned the water on only a brown trickle came out. The Major had told him never to brush his teeth with tap water, as Beirut’s sewage lines often mixed with its fresh water supply, but he hadn’t warned him that there might not be any water at all.

It was too late to knock on anyone’s door. He had no choice but to go to bed, but he hadn’t brought sheets. He’d been told the apartment was furnished. No one had mentioned he’d need to supply his own linens.

In the end, he chose the leather couch over the bare mattress and fell into a fitful sleep. All night he dreamed of Hagar—her face, her black curls, her musical Egyptian accent, her tapered fingers.

In the dream, he relived the time he’d thrown out all the empty beer and pop cans under the bathroom sink in an effort to help with the tidying up. Hagar shouted at him, explaining with hand gestures and the odd English word that she’d kept all her earnings in one of those cans—every penny they’d paid her in the last month since they’d hired her as housekeeper and cook.

It was then that he'd realized she couldn't bring the money home, as it wasn't safe for her to have all that American cash. He'd convinced the Major to replace all the money she'd lost.

She'd looked at him differently after that, as if she'd never been shown such mercy. And she left him gifts: fresh pomegranate seeds, an impeccably ironed shirt, a blue lotus on his pillow.

There was no going back.

In the dream, he could feel the silk of her skin and smell her hair. It was so real that when he woke in the middle of the night, alone in the darkened apartment, he felt bereft, like when he'd first learned of her death.

He got up and turned on the light. Nothing. The power was out—something else the Major had warned him about. He fumbled for the candles and matches Lucie had given him as a parting gift.

He lit a match so he could see the time on his watch. Two-fifteen. His heart sank. It was still several hours before sunrise, and there was no electric light to read by. No coffee.

In Cyprus he'd had a hotel restaurant nearby and an all-night café across the street, but here he didn't dare even step outside until first light. The Major had said most of the kidnappings happened after dark. The thought of all those foreign journalists held for ransom in Hezbollah strongholds made him shiver.

He put the candle in an empty wine bottle left behind by the previous tenant, brought it into the living room, and pulled *Lorna Doone* out of his bag. He was reading his way through the classics.

He read until he could see the warships in the bay illuminated by the rising sun. From a nearby minaret, a muezzin called the faithful to prayer.

He imagined the Major waking up next to Lucie in their apartment across the city. In Egypt the Major had always been the first one up—a vestige of his boarding school upbringing with the Oblate Fathers, who'd insisted that all their young pupils attend early morning Mass.

Doc dressed quickly and slipped out the door and down the stairs, making a mental note never to use the elevator after what the Major had said about Beirut's frequent blackouts.

The fog from the day before had lifted; the dampness was gone. On the Corniche, a paper-thin man was squeezing pomegranates. He'd set up a stall with his back to the beach. He beckoned Doc over. "American, welcome. Salaam."

“Canadian.” Doc pointed at the red and white pin on his jacket. It felt good to be walking outside. The air still smelled like sewage, but he enjoyed the salty spray on his face.

The pomegranate seller wore a white *keffiyeh* on his head, held in place by a black cord, and a small prayer rug was laid out next to his stall.

Doc imagined the man doing his morning prayers, facing east toward the rising sun, and envied him his morning ritual. It would be a reassuring thing—a comfort—to believe in something bigger and more powerful than himself, but at fifty he felt too old and foolish to try. He would need someone to explain everything—even the basics—not like this man and the Major, who were firmly established in their faith.

“Want juice?” The vendor held up a pomegranate the size of a baseball.

“Yes.” His whole body craved it.

The juice was bright red, like crushed strawberries, and his taste buds quickened when he drank it. He hadn’t had anything to drink since the three glasses of Liebfraumilch the Major had served him with supper.

The drink revitalized him. For a moment, he thought of jogging along the Corniche the way many of the officers jogged along the beach in Cyprus. But his leather loafers weren’t made for running, and he might not be able to shower before reporting for duty. The Major was picking him up at seven-fifteen.

He was dreading the day ahead and the prospect of patrolling the city’s hotspots. At least he could trust the Major’s judgment. He wouldn’t flirt with danger unnecessarily. There was consolation in that.

He gave the vendor a U.S. five-dollar bill—a huge extravagance—maybe more than the man expected to make all day. But it felt good, especially after the night he’d had.

When the Major arrived at 7am—fifteen minutes early, as predicted—Doc was waiting for him outside. They drove to the U.N. headquarters, where Doc was outfitted with the blue beret and khaki uniform worn by Canadian peacekeepers. The pants and shirt were ill-fitting—too tight in places, baggy in others. Doc looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror and felt like a man in costume.

The Major introduced him to several other peacekeepers, including Exupéry Bek—a stout, heavily tattooed captain from Marseilles who would patrol with them for the day.

Bek sat in the driver's seat and the Major sat beside him, map in hand, leaving Doc to sit alone in the back.

Doc took an instant dislike to the captain when he barely swerved to avoid a legless beggar on the side of the road and then made a disparaging remark about how the city was overrun with lowlifes. In Cyprus he'd heard people say that most of the French serving in Lebanon were spies.

They'd been driving only a few minutes when Bek pulled over in front of a bakery on Hamra Street. "First things first."

They drank tiny cups of black Turkish coffee standing up at the counter. The thick, syrupy liquid brought Doc back to Egypt. When Hagar made coffee—a lengthy, complicated procedure—the whole house filled with the rich, irresistible scent.

The croissant the Major ordered for him was buttery and light. "It's worth it, just for the food," the Major said. Bits of pastry clung to his mustache.

Doc wasn't sure if he was joking. He thought of Lucie and the kids trying to make a home for themselves in the war-torn city—something he'd never dream of imposing on his two boys in Calgary, even if he'd had the chance.

When the Major and Bek headed back to the jeep, a knot formed above Doc's breastbone. He wanted to linger in the bakery's fragrant, warm atmosphere, watching the customers come in, listening to the melodious Arabic.

The Major told Bek they would head east, toward the Green Line, and Beirut's former downtown district.

"All we have to do is show up," the Major explained over his shoulder. "Our presence stops the fighting."

The acidic coffee burned in Doc's stomach. They were going into the militarized zone—the epicentre of the war—with nothing to defend themselves.

They passed a couple of U.S. Marines in combat gear. Farther down the street were Lebanese militia armed with Kalashnikovs. Doc's heartburn was raging now, threatening cramps.

Outside the shopping district, the roads became an obstacle course of potholes and rusted, bombed-out cars. In the absence of traffic lights, drivers chose whichever side of the road was convenient, using their car horns to communicate with oncoming vehicles. The buildings were increasingly dilapidated and riddled with bullet holes, with walls or rooftops missing.

Doc clutched the jeep's door handle. The diesel fumes, shouts of angry

drivers, and incessant beeping of car horns created a cacophonous cloud around him.

When they arrived at the Green Line checkpoint—unmistakable because of the wild shrubs and plants that grew along the demarcation line—everything grew eerily calm. A ghost town stretched before them.

“Stop here,” the Major said when they came to a fork in the road, but Bek turned down an alleyway.

Machine guns rattled nearby.

“What are you doing?” the Major’s voice had an angry edge to it. “There’s fighting here.”

Doc’s heartburn climbed up his chest, causing spasms in his throat.

“We should go a bit farther,” Bek said, “to see who’s responsible for the shooting.”

Then there was a second round of machine gun rattle, louder this time, followed by the zing of a rocket and the unmistakable stench of burning fabric.

Doc wanted to jump out and run back, but this neighbourhood would be even more dangerous on foot. There could be land mines or trip wires. He’d treated men in field hospitals who’d lost partial limbs and had to suffer amputation.

“Turn around,” the Major said.

But Bek kept going. “Just a little farther.”

Hatred for Bek seethed inside Doc. He wanted to grab him by the neck and scream at him to smarten up and listen to the Major.

A rifle popped. An unearthly silence settled over the jeep, followed by a rustle of movement.

“Get down!” the Major bellowed.

Doc flattened himself onto the floor of the jeep just as a bullet pinged against the windshield and another hit the back. They were surrounded.

Blood pounded in Doc’s ears. His head buzzed with static. Fear seized his body like a vise. He deserved to die. Hagar had died because of him.

Her brothers had her by the hair. They were dragging her. She clawed at the ground, screaming for them to stop. They called her a slut. The white doctor’s whore. A blight on their family’s honour. They dragged her to the back of the compound, shot her in the heart, and then stuffed her body in a dumpster. When the police found her, vultures had pecked out her eyes.

He clawed at his head, trying to erase the memory.

“They’re gone,” the Major said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Doc opened his eyes and sat back on the seat. Bek was turning the jeep around in jerky stop-and-go movements.

“I’m going to be sick,” Doc said. A bullet had burned a hole in the jeep’s passenger seat next to the Major’s left shoulder.

The next morning, near the place where the pomegranate seller had been, a man had spread a blanket on the sidewalk, displaying an assortment of plastic kitchen tools, t-shirts, and second-hand books.

Doc scanned the titles looking for a Middle Eastern cookbook in English, but most of the books were in Arabic. He selected a grey paperback from between two brick-coloured tomes of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It was a volume on stamp collecting—the kind of how-to information book every collector should have. He paid the vendor one American dollar for it and put it in his windbreaker pocket.

He left it on his dining room table, propped against the empty wine bottle with the candle stub in its mouth. Next to it, he placed a note for the Major.

Please give this book to your daughter for me, with all best wishes.

Outside his building, he hailed a taxi—an ancient Mercedes with duct tape around its fender—and asked the driver to take him to the airport. He’d catch the first plane out—whether to Greece or Egypt or France, he didn’t care. The fish would likely spoil. Lucie would have to throw it out. He hoped she would forgive him for the mess.