

ONE

Two years after his near-murder in Beirut, Brooke Chandler visited his mentor, Carter Grey, to contemplate his future as a spy.

Headed for Grey's redoubt in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Brooke drove his Ferrari through the rolling Virginia countryside. The air of mid-afternoon felt hot and close. Timed as an escape from Washington in the steam bath of August, the trip was also a chance to see the couple who, given Brooke's routine deception of everyone he encountered, offered him the respite of intimacy and ease. The Greys had become his shadow family.

North of Charlottesville, Brooke turned onto one country road onto another that narrowed to a dirt track winding through wooded foothills, ever higher, until he reached the Greys' retreat at the top of a ridge three thousand feet above sea level. A large wooden structure, it was the work of Grey's hands, built before the wreckage of his body prohibited hard labor. Now it was home. Jutting from the site, its rear deck commanded a view of forested ridgelines receding in the distance, becoming shadows in a thin low fog that glimmered with reflected sunlight. This was, Grey had explained to Brooke, the fulfillment of a lifelong plan—to drink cocktails in his dotage while admiring a perfect view.

But the home was also the summation of a life. Perfectly maintained, it housed an astonishing collection of pristine guns from wars fought by nine generations of Americans—many forgotten, misconceived, or misunderstood—and carefully chosen rugs, art, and furniture from Grey's assignments overseas. Outside were satellite dishes for the television,

computer, and communications equipment through which Grey kept in touch with a world where, usually in secret, he had once maintained the power to change events.

Those times, Grey had remarked to Brooke, were defined by the Cold War and the rise of the American empire, breeding a sense of mission that, while sometimes illusory, had made the work less soul-wearing. Grey was from the Kennedy generation: gentlemen spies whose mandate had been to shape history and who, in the end, were shaped by it. In succession, he had operated in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, served as station chief in Germany at the height of the Cold War, and helped precipitate the collapse of the Soviet empire by equipping a half million Afghans to fight the Red Army—while, he added ruefully, helping train the militia who formed the Taliban. Along the way he became the most decorated agent in the history of the CIA, honored as one of the fifty most important figures when the agency marked its fifty years. But he had spent the last two decades as an administrator in Washington, barred by age and injury from fieldwork, until the toxic politics of the city had merged with debilitating pain to drive him to retirement. Now he was here.

Brooke got out of his car, savoring the crisp, cool air. At once the front door opened and Grey stepped steadily onto the front porch. He appraised Brooke, then his expensive ride. “Still driving that toy, I see.”

“The agency promised me a life of adventure,” Brooke responded. “Now I’m reduced to dodging radar guns.”

Grey grunted, a mixture of dismissal and comprehension. When he hobbled down the front steps, fighting the weakness in his spine to hold himself erect. His head of steel-gray hair was still full, and Grey remained handsome in a way made craggy by age and adversity—if America was replicating the fall of Rome, he had once remarked to Brooke, then he was Roman ruins. What remained young were his clear light-blue eyes and the vigor with which, as always, he embraced Brooke Chandler like a son.

They might have passed for that, Brooke knew. Once, in a moment of remembrance as Grey slept, his wife, Anne, had told Brooke that he evoked her husband before the nightmare of Iran. Brooke had seen the photographs; Carter had combined the can-do alertness of a soldier with the strong, clean features of the all-American boy. Brooke had the same

blond hair, a chiseled face that suggested his heritage, and the smile of a generation raised on fluoride and orthodontia. Brooke tried to wear his handsomeness lightly; he knew that he had been born lucky. Until a decade ago, the year before he joined the agency, he had endured no real hardship or disappointment. Despite the years since, he still looked it.

The two men smiled at each other. "I'd say that you seem good," Brooke said, "except that you'd remind me I'm a practiced liar. So how are you really?"

"Good in the morning," Grey said matter-of-factly, "medicated by two. Given that it's four o'clock, and I just got up from my nap, I'm trying to remember who you are."

"Don't worry, Carter. Anne will remind you."

Grey laughed without humor. "Marrying me really was the devil's pact. Twenty good years, and now she's practicing medicine and running a retirement home."

"She'd still make that deal," Brooke answered. "At your worst, you're never dull."

As if on cue, Anne Grey appeared in the doorway. Slight, blond, and

Anne shot him a look of mock impatience. “Marry one of them and none of us would have to lie.”

“It’s harder than you think,” Brooke replied. “I suspect Carter married the only woman who’d have him.”

Now her expression mimed the solemnity of thought. “True. I was young and foolish then, easily distracted by sex and talk of foreign travel.”

Grey conjured up a scowl of displeasure. “You got here just in time,” he informed Brooke. “But it’s too early for a drink, and I’m still too full of morphine. Let’s attempt a walk and I’ll describe the other women in my life.”

“I already know about the one with the navel ring,” Anne replied. Kissing her husband, she added lightly, “Don’t wear Brooke out.”

Brooke heard her silent message: *Don’t let him fall.*

“I won’t stand for it,” he assured her.

Her rear garden, Anne’s work, bloomed with flowers and tomatoes. Grey prodded Brooke toward a walking trail beneath the shade along the ridgeline. He moved with determination, but the odd step was halting, marking back injuries and internal damage dating back to the fall of the shah over thirty years before. Risking his life, Grey had shed his cover as a diplomat to give an endangered Iranian agent—a member of the shah’s intelligence service—money and false documents to facilitate his escape. On the way back, he encountered two members of the Revolutionary Guard, their loathing of Americans fueled by fanaticism and hatred of the shah’s secret police. Mistaking the American “diplomat” for what he was—a spy—the two men decided to stomp him to death. They were well on their way when Grey located the gun in his suit coat. He killed them in an instant.

Spitting up blood, Grey crawled to his car, drove to a safe house, and slept for two days. Then he returned to the embassy, refusing to report his injury for fear of being ordered to abandon his post. When he finally endured the first of a series of operations that kept him alive, the surgeon who viewed his shattered organs and broken ribs and spine had told Anne, “This is worse than the worst car wrecks I’ve ever seen, and those patients died.”

Grey lived on, but as a different man. Years later, he could still describe to Brooke the glittering zeal in his assailants’ eyes. “That was when I realized,” he concluded, “that America as a nation had no clue about what the hell this was about. Most Americans still don’t.”

Now they paused, standing on Grey's latest point of pride, a new bridge that crossed a rivulet still swollen with late-spring rains. Leaning on the railing, they watched the ridgelines as they softened in the light of early evening, two men at peace. At length, Grey asked, "So how *is* the Out t now? For you, I mean."

"You know how it is," Brooke said flatly. "Maybe getting burned in Beirut wasn't a career killer. But being chained to a desk job makes me feel like the living dead. I still perceive everything around me, but can no longer speak or move."

His mentor glanced at him sideways. "They're keeping you safe. Though perhaps in the minds of some, you're serving a stretch in purgatory for the sin of being right."

Brooke shrugged. "Better than getting killed, I'm sure. What a joke of a death *that* would have been, taken out by a couple of amateurs from al Qaeda because my idiot station chief couldn't tell a double agent from his own unfaithful wife."

Grey laughed sofly. "You don't get out of life alive. You were hoping to die for a reason?"

"Everyone dies for a reason. I was hoping for a better one."

"At least you helped the Lebanese break up an al Qaeda cell."

"I could have done more," Brooke objected. "When Lorber butted in, there was still work to do."

Grey gazed out at the ridges and valleys. "Dangerous work. Thanks to Lorber's blunder, you're more likely to die in bed at the age of ninety-five. The question becomes how you kill the time between now and then."

"Not this way. Serving as a bureaucrat erodes my sense of purpose. I've taken to reading analysts' reports on al Qaeda just to sate my curiosity."

"Which is a good thing," Grey opined. "You need curiosity, and you need to care about the work. Have you thought about becoming an analyst?"

Brooke shook his head. "I'm a field officer by nature. As long as I'm with the agency I want to serve where it matters. I've been stuck here too long."

"Granted." Grey eyed him more closely. "But I heard another element just now—'as long as I'm with the agency.'"

Brooke fell quiet for a time. "I've started questioning my life," he

acknowledged. "I've always accepted that foreign postings made relationships harder. So does deception. Not that I minded lying to foreigners—that's what we're supposed to do. But now I'm telling Mickey Mouse lies to neighbors, the women I meet, and friends who've spent years believing they still know me. Even my parents think I've got some desk job at the State Department."

"You're allowed to tell your parents, Brooke."

"And horrify my mother? She'd probably leak my identity to the *New York Times*." Brooke paused, then added with resignation, "Feeling distant from my parents is nothing new. But sometimes I visit my friends from graduate school—with sharp wives, and little kids they like—and I want a family of my own."

"Anne told me you were seeing someone. A lawyer, wasn't it?"

"We've broken up. Erin was no fool—she'd started calling me 'elusive.' I had to decide whether we were worth breaking cover for, and concluded we weren't." Brooke smiled a little. "Besides, it takes a special woman to help you live a lie. Which is why, in my expert opinion, Bernie Mado never told his wife he was a crook."

"Maybe Mado just liked lying," Grey parried. "I grant you I was lucky in Anne. The life imposes a certain solitude. Further complicated, in field officers, by the rules against romantic entanglements with foreign nationals."

Brooke raised his eyebrows. "I got entangled once or twice in Lebanon—it deepened my cover. But that's all it was."

"You're lucky to have gotten by with it," Grey said dryly. "I remember the case of one of our analysts, a Hindu, who started sleeping with his mother and sister . . ."

"Not at the same time, I hope."

"No. When confronted, our man said his transgressions were a matter of caste—he couldn't find a wife of his station in the entire D.C. area. Nonetheless, we freed him. Not for incest, mind you, but for sleeping with foreign nationals. We have our standards, after all."

Brooke could not help but laugh. "Thank God for that."

"Which reminds me," Carter continued, "wasn't there an Israeli woman leech over from your former life? You once were quite attached to her, I thought."

"That was years ago. It's been five years since I told her my last lie."

Something in Brooke's tone of voice caused Grey to appraise him. "What happened to her?"

"No idea. After the war between Israel and Hezbollah, she simply vanished. No email, no phone, no nothing. For all I know she's dead."

Studying Brooke's face, Grey asked nothing more. "About your career," he said at length, "it's time for a think. And a drink." He hesitated, as though reluctant to ask a favor. "Mind helping me get back up the hill?"

Regarding his mentor with fond concern, Brooke resolved to stop complaining. "Anything for a single malt scotch," he said. But he knew Grey had more to say. His mentor had invested too much in Brooke's career, and in Brooke himself, to remain silent about his future.