

## *Prologue*

Wednesday, May 2

**T**onight they were early. It was just ten-forty when the two Marines reached the gate of the American Cultural Center for their nightly security check. This was fine with Corporal Ronald Corker. He had a date with his girl at twelve.

Vary your time, vary your route, they were told. It was hard to vary the route with the Center on a one-way street, but you could vary the time. Security's idea was to keep them guessing, and Drew was trying to catch the guard asleep.

"I find that guy under the stairs tonight, I'll bust his ass," he growled. Drew was tall and skinny, with straight black hair and narrow, sharp features.

"I thought we wasn't supposed to lay a hand on 'em," said Corker. Small and blond, with a brush cut and less than a year in the Corps, Corker was only nineteen. But he was cocky.

"I know that, stupid. What I'm sayin' is, I'll damn sure call Cross and get him fired."

Drew was five years older and a sergeant; so Corker had to do things Drew's way. It wasn't always easy.

"Last time we called Cross at night he chewed us out."

"That's why we write it up so he can find it in the morning. Blow your horn and we'll see if the guy's awake."

Corker sounded the horn, and Drew looked at his watch.

"If it takes him over ten seconds to open that gate, it means he's asleep. Four, five, six..."

The gate clicked. The front door onto the veranda opened.

An old man in a jellaba and tarboosh was silhouetted against the light.

"That's a security violation right there." Drew watched the man run up to swing the gate open for them. "He clicked it open before he even seen who it was. And where he was standing, anyone coulda picked him off and walked right in."

They drove into the yard and up to the house. It was a big, comfortable villa in the French colonial style, with thick walls and high ceilings. Bougainvillea climbed one of the white walls, and a broad veranda reached around to a garden in the rear. Corker parked the van.

"Sleeping again, Mohamed?" Drew asked.

"No, sir. No sleep. All night wake up."

"You better believe it. Next time Mohamed sleep, Mohamed no job. Got that?"

"Yes, sir!" The guard grinned, snapped to attention and saluted the French way. Black snags showed under the unkempt gray mustache. "Me good soldier, sir."

Drew snorted. "Shit, if this guy'd ever been in any army, he'd know not to salute a sergeant. You looking to join the Marine Corps, Mohamed?"

The old man grinned again, not understanding.

"I guess a little duty in the Corps wouldn't hurt any of 'em," Corker said. "C'mon, Drew. Let's get this over with."

Drew shook his head. "Take it easy, kid. You'll make your date."

"Man, I better. I need it the worst way."

Corker felt good tonight. In fifteen minutes they'd be through, and then back to the Marine House to change clothes and check out for the Magic Carpet and his date with Fatima.

They entered and stopped at the reception desk.

"Who's been here tonight, Mohamed?" Drew asked.

"Nobody, sir. No movie tonight. No talk. Library close six o'clock. English class finish eight o'clock. Everybody go home."

"Let's see your sign-in book."

Corker laughed. "Two months since the inspectors told

Pascal to use a sign-in book, and he ain't done it yet. 'Course, they don't need security," he sneered. "They got culture!"

"Well, there's no classified anyhow. Nothing to steal here but books. Let's go into the library."

They opened the French doors and turned on the lights. Dog-eared volumes in English, French and Arabic lined the shelves: American classics, standard periodicals, and new works on the United States. Nothing political, with the Sharkies playing footsies with their friends up in the Gulf. Just keep your mouth shut and stay out of trouble.

Corker wondered why we even stayed around if they didn't like us. Why not just walk out and let them rot? But Drew'd said it was so they could keep an eye on the Sharkies. Besides, it was U. S. property and we didn't want to see it left empty and mildewed like the other houses where the French had all left in a hurry—the ones that didn't get their throats cut, that is.

"You made your rounds tonight, Mohamed?" Drew asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. Always make rounds."

"Then how come that window's open?"

The guard scurried across the room and closed the window, returning with a sheepish grin.

"This has got to be the sloppiest Center I've ever seen," Drew muttered, pulling out a book at random. "They leave the windows open and then wonder why half the books are missing." He glanced at the volume—*Les Aventures de Tom Sawyer*.

"C'mon, Drew, let's get upstairs and finish the job," Corker whined, walking toward the staircase.

"What's the matter, Ron?" Drew grinned. "Afraid your Fatima's gonna run off with some Sharky?"

"She won't do that," Corker said. "Fatima's a good kid. She'll wait for me. She'd better."

They crossed the hall and climbed the marble staircase. On the second floor a broad landing opened into four or five offices. Drew went from door to door with his ring of keys while Corker looked inside each office, flipping through pa-

pers in the in-baskets. At the last door he said, "Now for Pascal's office and we're through."

Corker whistled through his teeth every time he went into that office. They'd made it over along with everything else at the Center so Pascal could meet the country's top cultural people there. Real fancy. Easy chairs and a couch around a coffee table, bookcases, a big mahogany desk and paintings on the walls—some by Sharky artists too! All that and a door opening onto a balcony. Man, if it didn't have that metal file cabinet in a corner with a bar and padlock, you wouldn't even know it was an office.

He noticed the desk piled high with papers. "Just look at that crap! The guy doesn't even clean off his desk at night!"

"Well, start in on it. I'll check the cabinet."

Drew went to the file cabinet, jiggled the bar and pulled the padlock. He wrote his initials and the time in the space reserved for them on the form taped to the top of the cabinet. He went to the French door and windows, opening each to test the closed shutters on the outside. "OK," he said when he'd finished. "Now let's go see Fatima."

There was no answer. Corker was reading a sheet of paper he had extracted from an envelope on the desk.

"Come on, Ron. I thought you was in a hurry to get laid."

Corker didn't look up. "Hey, how about this?" he murmured.

"How about what?"

"This. It's not only Secret, it's Limdis too."

"You're kidding."

"No shit. Look at it."

Drew found himself looking at a photocopy of a typed Memorandum of Conversation between the Ambassador and some Frenchman. It was marked "Secret" across the top of the page and "Limited Distribution" farther down. "Jesus!" he murmured. "Where the hell did you find this?"

"In the pile."

"Where in the pile, stupid?"

"I dunno. Right about here, I guess."

"Then we better go through every goddamn paper on that desk. Here, gimme half."

Corker pushed part of the pile across the desk. They went through the papers one by one.

"Now the desk drawers."

When they had scoured the room, Drew shook his head.

"Security violations this guy has had, but never worse than Limited Official Use. This time it's gonna be his ass."

"Let's write it up and get outa here. Gimme a pink slip."

"Easy, kid. You'll make your date. This thing is hot. We gotta do it right."

He sat at the desk and filled out a Report of Security Violation. When he'd finished, he slipped a copy under one corner of the desk blotter.

"Now gimme that Secret document. We're taking it back to the Embassy to secure it. Then we write it up for Cross. Everything by the book."

"You ain't gonna call him at home, are you?" asked Corker.

"Nothing says we gotta call him as long as we secure it. I don't want my ass reamed out again for that."

At the reception desk Drew stared into the old man's eyes.

"Mohamed, you sure nobody came in here tonight?"

"Nobody, sir."

"How about Mr. Pascal?"

"Mr. Pascal he go home six-thirty."

"And nobody else came in?"

"No, sir. School finish eight o'clock. Everybody go home."

Drew shrugged his shoulders. "If that's his story, he'd better stick to it."

They went outside and waited while Mohamed opened the gate. The van was old, and Corker had trouble starting the engine. When finally it caught, they lurched into the street.

"No accidents tonight," said Drew. "This document's gotta get into a safe, and we gotta write a report. After that you can think about seeing Fatima. And I wouldn't wanta be in Pascal's shoes for all you could pay me."