

Chapter One: War

‘Face it, April, you might not even be adopted.’ Renee leant away from me like I had something she could catch.

We were sat at the side of the road, pretending to like the taste of the cigarette we shared. Renee had bummed the end. It was all damp now and disgusting. We were in Werribee, on the outskirts of Melbourne. We were fourteen. It was the late 1980s and I didn’t have a clue who I was.

‘Maybe your mum was having it off with one of the locals over there, and her and your dad just told everyone you were adopted cause you obviously weren’t his.’

‘Or, what if your parents did adopt you—and it’s all true—and then... what if they hadn’t?’

I stood up and flicked the butt into the kerb. Enough of this pointless conversation. I was going to do it now. I was going to blaze all the way home and ask my so-called mother just who in the world my real parents were.

My mother was in the kitchen. She had her bag with her and looked like she was about to go out.

‘Why aren’t you at school?’

‘Sent home sick,’ I said, ‘I need to talk.’

‘How bad is it?’

I knew what she was getting at. ‘Not that bad.’

‘You’ll have to come with me to the mall. Your dad needs shirts.’

We walked to the mall. I said nothing and all the way, I figured I’d lose my nerve, let it slide like I had every time before. Many times, I thought I had worked up enough courage to ask her about the exact circumstances of how I had come to be adopted. I’d rehearsed it over and over again. I was excited to know. I dreaded finding out. I had a burning list of questions. If ever I got even remotely close to asking either one of my parents, though, I would feel disloyal, as if I was about to betray them, ruin things, spoil everything. I had no idea if she’d sensed the big question was coming today.

In a small plasticky café in the mall, she bought me a cappuccino and we sat down facing each other.

‘Who are my real parents?’ I blurted. ‘How was I adopted?’

I had always known I was adopted. I don't remember whether it was my mother or my father who had explained the simple fact of it. Nor can I remember exactly when, or in which of the houses we lived in during my family's long, restless trek across Australia. Throughout the 1980s, the man I called 'Dad' hopped from oil job to oil job, and we hopped with him, house to house, city to city, from Werribee in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne, to Singapore, Perth and back, finally, to Melbourne for good. As a child, I didn't like the constant change. I would often place bets with my mother when she would say, 'this next house is the one we'll be staying in forever', and inevitably we would move again and I would win my bet. I was also painfully shy and I didn't like having to make new friends over and over. I also didn't like to have to explain to new people, like Renee, that I was adopted, and be reminded of the mystery of who I really was.

In one of these houses where we were supposedly living forever I must have found out, that I had been born in a country called Lebanon. They never showed it to me on a map, so I never knew where it was until I was older. I knew I'd been adopted because I needed a home. I knew my parents had left the Lebanon place because a war had forced them to leave. Being adopted meant nothing, I was told. It was trivial in the scheme of things. We were all happy as we were. We should all be moving forwards, always. I was not to be ashamed of it, though they didn't like to go into too much detail and I was embarrassed and shy whenever my adoption was mentioned in front of other people. Melbourne has a large immigrant Lebanese population and if my parents ever met any of them, they would proudly explain our shared heritage. When this happened, I didn't know what to say. I didn't really know what it meant.

I wasn't treated differently from my siblings. After all, my parents had thought they couldn't have children. Adopting me had changed everything for them, almost brought my sister Fiona and brother Jamie to life. My baby sister arrived less than a year after my parents found me. This, I learned later, is common in childless couples who decide to adopt: they conceive quickly afterwards, as if their act of generosity is rewarded with a miracle.

If my parents got a gift — my siblings — for adopting me, then I wondered if there was any penalty for a mother who gives up her child; what happens to her? I did think about her. As I grew from a child to a teenager, I felt her more, my birth mother. I felt her absence. I didn't know her face, her voice, her name or where she was from and how she came to give me up, but she was always with me. I wouldn't be me without her. My adoptive mother, I was not like her. I was tall, olive-skinned, with dark hair and brown eyes. She was petite, blonde, with fair Scottish skin and light, hazel eyes. People noticed this. People remarked. My mother would make a joke of it, she would say I was the milkman's

daughter. The joke made me self-conscious. I knew I was not the milkman's daughter in the same way I knew I wasn't hers. And now I had asked her, asked her outright who I really was.

When it came, her voice was low and measured. It was quite clear that she was going to tell me but we were not going to have a conversation about it.

'None of this matters,' she said, 'but if you must know, April...'

My mother and father hadn't known much about Lebanon before they arrived there. It was just another posting for a couple who were by now used to going where the company wanted them to go. I already knew that before I was adopted my parents had moved around. My dad worked in the oil industry, for an American company called Atwood Oceanics. Starting with a job in the Bass Strait between Australia and Tasmania, he worked on rigs that were built to find, drill and tap oil to be extracted and processed later. All of Dad's jobs were offshore, in the middle of the sea, challenging environments where safety procedures were paramount and perilous journeys and extreme situations were a frequent occurrence. After the Bass Strait, he worked in South America and then, in the early 1970s, Aberdeen. It was while he was working in the North Sea that he met my mother. I knew that for a while afterwards they had lived in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. In 1975, they ended up in Lebanon, briefly, when my dad was sent by Atwood to join a team prospecting for oil in the Red Sea.

They were told that Lebanon was modern and safe, the most stable country in the Middle East. Once a province of the Ottoman Empire and then after the first world war a French colonial territory, it's a beautiful little country with Syria on one side and a coastal strip on the other, that nestles Israel at its southern tip. Beirut – where they lived and I was born – was known as the Paris of the Middle East because of its cafes and links to the Paris art world and fashion scene. In the 1960s and 1970s, Beirut went through something of a heyday. In boom times, it became a playground for the rich and anyone seeking the high life in a sumptuous setting. Famously, you could ski in the morning and swim in the Mediterranean in the afternoon. It was a land of atmospheric cities, spectacular beaches, lush valleys, big cornflower-blue skies and, everywhere, the picturesque ruins of civilisations that over time had invaded and were expelled from Lebanon: Phoenician, Crusader, Ottoman and French.

Cultures and creeds mingled freely. The country seemed diverse and tolerant, a frequently contested territory where different tribes had learned to bump along with each other: Maronite Christians, Armenians, Palestinian refugees, Shia and Sunni Muslims and the Druze. From the outside, all these people seemed to co-exist peacefully. In reality, and my parents were oblivious to this, but far from being a distant suburb of

sophisticated Paris, Beirut – and all of Lebanon – was a guttering candle, a country on the brink of a civil war that had been slow-burning since the 1940s and when it came would last for close to two decades.

When my parents arrived, the civil unrest in Lebanon was regarded as a temporary aberration by the western and ex-pat community. They found an apartment close to the shore in the suburb of Ras Beirut. My father would spend a week at home and then go out to work on the rigs for two weeks at a time, leaving my mother behind on her own. I have some difficulty imagining her there, on her own while fighting was breaking out across Lebanon. She was terrified, especially as for the most part she was alone in a foreign country. She went from Aberdeen, where she had met my father, to Las Palmas and now Beirut. When she landed, rather than the stable modern city that she'd expected, there was already a civil war spreading across the country – it just hadn't been declared yet. At night, sniper fire would crackle intermittently. She was scared and alone, for weeks at a time without my father, in a city and situation utterly unlike anything she'd ever known growing up in Aberdeen. She must have needed something else in her life, something positive to do, because she volunteered to work for the Red Cross.

It was at the Red Cross that she became friends with Alice, another Scot whose husband was working on the same rig as my dad. After a while, Alice told my mother that she was helping a young law student from the American University in Beirut who, for some unknown reason – maybe financial or religious – could not keep her baby. If adoptive parents were not found, the baby, when it was born, would end up in a halfway house. Fortunately, Alice was talking to a Swedish couple. They wanted to adopt a baby but there was quite a fearsome and byzantine bureaucracy to negotiate if this were to be a legitimate, properly legal undertaking. Alice was helping them through this maze. My mother admired Alice's commitment to these people she hardly knew. Mum couldn't have children herself. Nothing had gone to plan after she and my dad had married. There had been a succession of miscarriages but it had never crossed her mind to raise someone else's baby.

The Swedes were due to arrive on 19 April 1975. On 13 April, they were probably thinking about passports and how they would travel to the airport and all the things they had to arrange for the new baby. On that day, fighting between Palestinian and Christian militias spread to downtown Beirut. The city centre was devastated and then divided in two on strictly sectarian lines. The Lebanese Civil War, deep set and long-gestating, had now sparked, flared and fired into life.

If you dig deep enough into Lebanese history you'll soon uncover the ruins and remnants of empires, of peoples washed up, of people who stayed on, of exiles and dreamers, of proud little communities defending their way of life. Lebanese society may have held itself together when it

was part of a larger patchwork, like the Ottoman or the French Empire, but after its independence in 1946, Lebanon became increasingly riven by sectarian conflict. Civil war had almost broken out several times before, notably in 1958. It's not a simple subject or easy to understand and despite living through its outbreak, my parents certainly didn't spend a lot of time contemplating its deep roots and long tendrils, its story or the inevitable war. If I ever asked about it, sometimes my mother would mutter about 'fanatics'; sometimes she would not be drawn at all. If I asked my father he seemed disappointed with the Lebanese for fighting each other.

In brief, Lebanon, particularly under the colonial French regime, was run by powerful coastal Christian families with connections to the West and who followed a pro-Western political agenda. Meanwhile, the majority of the population were Muslim and more left-wing, more pro-Soviet in the way that other Arab countries, like Syria, were. These numbers were swelled by the arrival of many Palestinians displaced by the foundation of the State of Israel and then Israel's conquest of the West Bank in 1967. Unlike their Arminian predecessors, Lebanon did not make the Palestinians citizens. They lived in camps for decades. Increasingly, Palestinian militias used Lebanon as a base from which to attack Israel and Israel retaliated against Lebanon. This was deeply resented by Christian groupings like the Falange, while Muslims tended to support and sympathise with the Palestinian cause. Add to this the game of international strategic chess, in which Iran and Syria could not see Lebanon becoming a satellite of Israel – and Israel could not countenance Lebanon becoming the catspaw of Islamic powers vowed to its destruction. Unless everyone was conciliatory and careful, the tinder-dry country was one lit match away from an inferno.

On 13 April 1975, outside the Church of Notre-Dame, security guards loyal to Pierre Gemayal, leader of the right-wing Christian Kataeb, or Falange party, shot four men during an assassination attempt. The shooting provoked a revenge attack, the notorious bus massacre, in which twenty-eight Palestinians were killed travelling through the Christian Ain El Remmaneh district.

My parents, initially, didn't know what they were witnessing. They had stayed indoors since the fighting started but couldn't comprehend or anticipate the scale and significance of the violence. These were bloody scuffles, temporary aberrations. They would die down. Normality would soon resume and everyday life get back into its groove, he out on the rig and she working with the Red Cross.

What may have opened their eyes was a trip they made to Tripoli, a city fifty miles to the north of Beirut. In the market there, they met a silversmith and bought a pair of silver horse figurines. Afterwards, they had lunch at a restaurant. As they sat down and were about to order, a large mob of gun-toting people strode past the restaurant window. The

peace of the afternoon was suddenly shattered by shots fired. The restaurateur told my parents that they had better jump in a taxi and return to Beirut. Luckily, they found a taxi quickly. They did not find out what happened in Tripoli that day but they had no plans to return and find out. It was time to leave.

On 18 April, my mother looked out of her window in Ras Beirut and saw lights that she thought were fireworks. People must be celebrating. The fighting had been an anomaly. The fighting was over. But the lights were rockets, missiles hurtling through the night sky. War had begun, and into this frightful mix was added a baby from poor students about to be adopted by a Swedish couple.

Things started to move fast and were taken out of my parents' hands. First, the oil company my father worked for decided to evacuate all its employees from Lebanon to Egypt. This was unprecedented and a sign of the seriousness of the political situation. Then, while my mother was preparing to leave, she rang Alice at the Red Cross to say goodbye and good luck. My mother sensed that Alice was agitated, and by more than just the general meltdown going on around them. The escalating violence in Beirut had deterred the Swedish couple in the adoption case Alice was working on. Afraid of not being able to get out of the country once they'd got in, they were not coming at all. They had abandoned their plans to adopt. For sure, Alice understood their reasons – they were afraid for their own lives. It was just too risky to travel. She just now feared for the fate of the baby that was due any day.

After the phone call, my mother made another, to my father, who was still out on the rig, preparing to come back to Beirut. She told him about me – the baby the law student needed to give away, and how because of the fighting the Swedish couple who had agreed to adopt me were not coming, and that I would be born into all this. There were only a few days left before it would be too late for anyone to adopt me, the child at the centre of it all.

On Dad's journeys to the rig, he had noticed the sprawling Palestinian refugee camps close to the airport. In the middle of winter, he had seen kids on the street outside the camp wearing nothing but a singlet and underwear. He was saddened by the abject poverty and the unfair treatment of these people. He knew what little chance they had to change their circumstances. War was coming and he understood what war means for the poor and vulnerable. My dad was aware of what happens to the innocent, especially children, in warzones, and he realised too that they may never be able to have their own children when my mother definitely wanted children. He told my mother that they should adopt me – the baby Alice was trying to save.

The first thing they needed to do was talk to Alice. When my mother telephoned her, she was over the moon and mightily relieved, especially as the law student mother-to-be had just been admitted to the

Trad Hospital in preparation for labour. Now they needed to work out how to adopt a baby legally in double-quick time in what increasingly looked like a war zone and with the clock ticking down towards a last flight out.

The early stages of the civil war in Lebanon were marked by truces, during which all sides seemed to hold back for a moment as if painfully aware of the horrors that they could unleash. Daily life appeared to go on as if nothing was happening, though in reality the religious lines were hardening. Men with carbines were increasingly seen taking up positions on the tops of buildings to fight for whatever Lebanon they believed in. It was through this cityscape that my mother – on her own as my dad was forced to work – found a taxi willing to take her across Beirut to the corner of two tree-lined streets, Gebran Khalil Gebran and Mexique Street. This was the site of the Trad Hospital, a 1940s brick building with a curved, white-stone facade and big windows.

As she walked through the arched doorway beneath blossoming bougainvillea that glowed in the April sun, she had all the doubts and hesitations, and questions of worth and readiness that all prospective parents go through, let alone a young woman who only a few days earlier decided to become a parent.

Away from the tense, powder-keg atmosphere of the Beirut streets, the hospital lobby was a peaceful oasis. A breeze floated through the front door as my mother took a seat in the cool, marble lobby and waited. A tall man with black wavy hair and a white coat walked over and introduced himself as Dr Bitar.

This was the first opportunity my mother had to discuss the adoption with someone in authority, who could make it happen or not. The news was mixed. On the one hand, there was not enough time to get any adoption formally approved and documented. This was usually and necessarily a lengthy, meticulous process. It certainly couldn't be whizzed through in a day. At this point my mother asked about my birth mother. Dr Bitar then repeated the bare details of her background that Alice had already provided. However, she was no longer in the hospital for I had already been born and as soon as she'd felt strong enough, the young Christian law student had discharged herself, leaving me behind.

'It was all very fleeting,' Dr Bitar said.

Knowing that there was little time before my parents were evacuated, the doctor then laid out the options. He knew terrible suffering would come with the war. There would be hardship and shortages and restrictions and no guarantees that any of the everyday certainties of peacetime would return soon. This crisis had a long tail. It had been building up for fifty years. No one had a clue whether they would survive it, whether it would come for them. At first, my mother had found Dr Bitar curt and overly formal, just like a busy doctor doing his job, but now, as he talked on, he seemed softer, gentler, more

emotional as he recognised the significance of adoption for this couple and for an unwanted Lebanese baby. If this couldn't have been arranged, I would likely have been given to the nuns. Possibly? Who knew? War was coming. You could smell it on the breeze.

Dr Bitar ushered a clerk from behind the front desk to take down my parents' names. He then took my mother up the stairs to the nursery on the first floor where she found nurses going about their duties in neat uniforms and soft-soled shoes. I lay in a white wooden bassinet in the corner of the room wrapped in a crisp white cotton blanket with my eyes shut tight, deep in slumber. Dr Bitar suggested my mother pick me up. She cradled me in her arms and squeezed me tightly. There was no getting away from this now. We were in this together.

Without another word, the doctor handed my mother a birth extract, a copy of a legal birth certificate that would do a good job standing in for the genuine article. The birth extract was short with a Trad Hospital header, dark type and was signed and stamped by Dr Bitar himself as the obstetrician. It stated that my Scottish Mother had given birth to me in the Trad Hospital in Beirut on 19 April 1975, and that I was her husband's daughter. All that was missing was my name.

'We'll call her April... April Louise,' my mother said.

The document was taken away and updated with my name.

'This is all you need,' the doctor said, 'now go to the Australian Embassy and get her a passport.'

My mother shook the doctor's hand. She knew that the man standing before her had given her an enormous gift. Although the doctor knew that what he had done was strictly speaking wrong, in his heart he knew it was strictly speaking right. In any other circumstance he would never have broken the rules and forged documents, but outside, Beirut was on the brink of disaster. The heyday, the Golden Age, was over. He was going to stay, though. He would remain with his patients, the sick, the wounded of Beirut. He had that steadfast, unbreakable look about him. He was not someone to cross or disappoint. He would not be ousted. He would protect for as long as he had strength and means. He would remember everything.

'Take her far away,' he said. 'And never, *never* bring her back here.'

The next day, there was only a small window of opportunity to get across the city and reach the Australian embassy to get my citizenship and passport. My dad, now back from the rig, had to do this on his own. Earlier in the year, Mum had been to an Australia Day party at the embassy and was scared of someone remembering that she wasn't pregnant then. I needed these documents, or I wouldn't be able to leave with them in the morning. As my father took me into the embassy, he was outwardly sure of himself but inside he was apprehensive. He knew the birth extract was effectively a fake birth certificate. What would

become of him, to all three of us, if it was discovered that the papers were false? But there were no questions and, with the final stamp on the paperwork, a Certificate of Citizenship to Australia was issued along with a crisp new passport. It had slipped under everyone's radar that I didn't have a real birth certificate and, for all of this good work, my parents, Dr Bitar and, unwittingly, the officials at the Australian Embassy were complicit in the big lie about who I really was.

The next morning, I was carried on board a plane to Cairo and flown away from my birthplace. Thirty-four years later I would return to Lebanon.

This is my story. The bare bones of it – my mother told me for the first time in that café in a Melbourne mall when I was fourteen years old. I cried afterwards. She hurried me along and we walked around a department store looking for shirts for Dad, not saying anything to each other. Guess Renee was right in the end, they did adopt me... and what if they hadn't? I was about to find out.