

This is a sample only, the Prelude and the first three chapters, of John Lathrop's new novel "The Whistleblower". Even if you don't read novels or you don't finish this sample, please scroll to the end of chapter three in order to provide feedback.

to my wife,

Margaret Kósa

97,357 words

The Whistleblower

by

John P. Lathrop

## PRELUDE

The setting sun had just touched the western sea as I and Dr. Yasemin Ozdural pulled the dead body, wrapped in one of her rugs, out of the trunk and on to the deserted beach. We were more than ninety minutes east of Kyrenia on the coast of Turkish Cyprus and the last village was miles behind us. Together we dragged the body from the carpet and down to the water's edge.

I retrieved Richard's snorkeling gear from the car and stripped down on the sand. Yasemin looked modestly away—she was Richard's woman not mine. I pulled on the wet suit and fins and tied on the weight belt around the dead man's waist. Yasemin took off her shoes, rolled up her white linen pants and we dragged the body into two feet of water until it was awash.

I pulled the facemask down from my forehead and breathed in from my nose, testing for fit. The mask was snug: airtight. I walked backwards into the sea, keeping the floating body near, dragging it by its weight belt. When the water reached my thighs I began swimming straight out to sea. After a few more yards I turned over, switched hands, and began breathing through my snorkel. The sea was dead calm. The visibility, had the sun been up, would have been fine, perhaps twenty feet, perhaps more. It was dusk. I saw nothing but black water, and it was getting increasingly cold. I swam strongly straight out for another three or four minutes and then hyperventilated and finned straight down.

I hadn't a depth gauge with me, but when I hit bottom I figured I was at least fifteen feet deep, perhaps twenty. By the mask's clip-on flashlight the bottom looked smooth and black: a good sign of depth. The dead man stuck to the bottom. The weight belt had slipped down around his hips and he sat upright, his legs straight out on the black mud. In the flashlight's feeble light his white linen jacket floated softly with the current.

I finned straight up through the weight of black water and burst through the surface, pulling the snorkel's mouthpiece away and filled my lungs with pure night air. I swam back strongly to shore, only standing when I reached waist high water.

Yasemin and I threw the throw rug into the sea. We hoped the tide was receding. I stripped off my wetsuit but neither of us had thought to bring a towel, so I dried myself as best I could with my shirt and pulled on my pants. We ran together barefoot in the sand back to the car. I turned Richard's car heater on full blast as I drove shirtless back to Yasemin's home. Her blouse had become partially undone from her exertions on the beach and I caught glimpses of white breast.

The moon was half obscured by distant clouds over the coastal range and Yasemin said that a summer evening storm was probably brewing. She smoked cigarette after cigarette and I cranked my own window slightly open for a whiff of fresh air. Her nicotine addiction only an addition to her exotic ethnic beauty. A Turkish blond from the southern shore of the Black Sea. I wondered how I had become, an American expat banker in Dublin, a refugee from U.S. law enforcement.

PART ONE

Dublin to Istanbul

## CHAPTER ONE

It had all started last year with Richard's letter.  
It read:

Dear Mike,

Are you still seeing Danielle and is she still working for the AVI? I have something to be hand-delivered to her. Can you do that for me? Can you fly to Istanbul at once? What I've got rivals Snowden's exposé of the NSA. Istanbul is just a day trip, maximum two days from Dublin. I won't be here much longer.

You should see Istanbul now. It's big money, headscarves are back in, the secular elite is on the run and the president is an Islamist bastard—but he's our bastard. It's no longer an emerging market. It's emerged. The Islamic cock has emerged.

Don't bother replying. Just get on a plane. Call my cell when you get in.

RB

PS: We've both been on the road for 20 years. Remember the valley, the coast—Santa Cruz? Ever have the urge to reconnect?

Apart from being a reminder of Richard's innate vulgarity—Islamic cock?—his letter was an invitation on a day which had begun with a rejection. My bank's president called me in to her office unexpectedly the moment I arrived.

Siobhan Flynn was about my age and was the only female bank president in Dublin. She hailed from the far west, from the same small town, Ballina, as had Mary Robinson, the former president of the Irish Republic. She was cut from the same cloth. She was large-boned, broad shouldered and leggy woman, fit, and of commanding presence. She was both better academically qualified and showed more natural leadership than her male colleagues. She also had more character: she stood out, in the clubby world of Dublin banking and politics, as much for her ethical fastidiousness as for her gender.

When I entered her office she got up from behind her desk and insisted that we sit in front in two chairs facing each other. As a senior executive I had joined her at various banking associations, conferences and staff parties. She could be companionable but not naturally warm. So, when we took our seats facing each other, I felt she was acting out of character. I was surprised and a little concerned.

"Have you ever heard, or overheard, the term 'West Brit'?"

"No."

"It is an old-fashioned term, although still in use. We Irish like derogatory expressions, especially if they're directed toward the English. Our bank's board is a pretty traditional, old-fashioned bunch.

“We’re now in our eighth year of the worst banking and unemployment crisis since the Great Depression. You haven’t earned yourself any favors by openly supporting David Cameron’s Tory government’s approach to their own crisis by a policy of fiscal austerity.”

“I’ve never pretended to be a Keynesian.” In fact, the bank’s board must all have known that I always voted a straight Republican ticket. Even I, however, couldn’t vote for what Obama called ‘the Donald’. For the first time in a long expatriate career I had cast, by fax, a vote for the Libertarian candidate.

“Even the IMF, hardly a bastion of liberal economic thought, has weighed in against the UK’s policy of fiscal austerity: it’s gone on too long. But I’ve not called you into my office to discuss your ideas on economic theory.”

She paused. “Your department has, until the last two years, been the bank’s only profitable business line since your appointment. So this is no reflection on your performance. Speaking personally, I couldn’t be more pleased at both your performance and your personal qualities as a colleague. But for the past year your business line has shown zero growth; instead the BRICs have all shown losses.

“This recession is eight years in, and as yet only the weakest of light at the end of the tunnel as regards Irish unemployment. The board has decided that it is no longer politically possible to have a foreigner at the bank at your executive level. You’re being let go as of today. Now.”

She handed me a folder.

“These are the terms of your package. I’m sure that you’ll agree that they’re suitable for an executive of your performance and position. Six months salary and a pro-rated bonus based on your performance to date.”

She continued, “Most of your staff will be retained but absorbed into other business lines in the bank, until such time as a suitable Irish replacement is found.”

“I urge you to retain as many of my staff as possible in their present positions. Particularly my personal secretary, Miss Cullen. I’ve been training her in assessing candidates for the bank’s investments. She has a shortlist and is capable of supervising the rest of my staff.”

She made a quick note. Then she stood up as did I. “There’s a personal reference from me in that file.” She held out her hand. I took it. “Thank-you, Michael, and good-bye.”

I left her office, I hope displaying an equanimity I did not feel, and took the elevator down. It was true that my portfolio’s performance had declined over the past year and a half. But that was part of a secular decline, world-wide, in demand and commodity prices. I had thought my position was immune. The board had thought otherwise.

I was stunned and numbed and descended eleven out of fourteen floors before I could think coherently about my situation. I was fifty-two. My business sector was profitable but not hiring and my personal network was my age or older and beginning to thin out. I left the building and flagged down a cab. We drove past a theater that Danielle had taken me to on her most recent visit. It still advertised the play we had seen on it’s marquee: August Strindberg’s “The Dance of Death”.

I welcomed and generally enjoyed what Danielle called “Mike Alexander’s intro to culture 101”. She was a highly cultivated woman and her introduction was deep and broad. In our three years of long-distance love we had attended two concerts of Schubert lieder, many classical orchestral concerts in different venues, mainly churches and concert halls, shows at Dublin art museums and plays by playwrights I had never heard of. Strindberg’s play was

still fresh in my mind. It concerned a passed over captain of the coast artillery, and how he has dealt with the disappointments of his personal life and career—his final posting as master of a quarantine station. His refrain throughout the play is “wipe out and pass on”.

#

Home in Ireland was a flat in a part of Dublin called Ballsbridge. A year previously I’d convinced the owner to convert the lease to a rental agreement; I was paying a bit more but could leave at any time. But did I want to leave, and if so, where did I want to go?

I was holding tight to that unexpected sense of freedom, but I never returned to my flat in the morning on a weekday and now I unlocked the door feeling like a stranger. I walked through the short foyer and looked around my living room. The building was Georgian and in the late nineteenth century had been divided tastefully. The rooms were large and the ceilings high and the interior restored to period. Above the ivory-painted wainscoting the walls were papered with a red and gold medallion design. A heavy mirror in a rococo frame hung over the green marble fireplace. Several nineteenth century paintings under glass broke up the wall paper. Their subjects were all equestrian. I have never been on a horse. I’d thought it a fitting Dublin home for a banker near his peak, possibly even with another rung to go on his career ladder. I’d even thought it glamorous in an old-world, Irish way: nostalgic but not threadbare. Now it just looked antique, ornate, oppressive.

I could call any of several friends in Dublin. Every one was employed and at this hour in one kind of office or another. The news of my status would spread fast enough in any case—why should I accelerate it?

I was free.

I felt my stomach lurch. I staggered to the bathroom and fell on my knees with my head over the toilet. But I came up with only dry heaves.

I got weakly to my feet, stripped and took a hot shower. I towelled off and wiping the steam from the bathroom mirror took a look at Mike Alexander. Just shy of six feet with trim brown hair, not yet receding, a little greying at the temples. A clear brow over alert brown eyes, a slightly prominent nose, wide mouth, capable in former days of laughter. Clean shaven with a strong chin. Straight shouldered, frame neither lean nor fat. My stint in the Air Force had set me up, and I had kept fit through a regimen of sit-ups, push-ups, and swimming. The physical inventory was intact.

There was nothing holding me in grey Dublin with its incessant drizzle and abandoned building sites. The countryside would still be green. I always enjoyed the west of Ireland, even before Danielle.

Danielle Cleary and I first made love in the Achill Island Hotel overlooking the North Atlantic. Achill Island lies off the coast of County Mayo in the far west of Ireland. As usual on Achill it was raining. The rain didn’t bother us. We had a real wood fire in the fireplace and I had Danielle beneath the sheets. I was forty-nine, she a decade younger. We shared many things in common, from international development finance to shared sexual preferences. This last shared interest was our focus that night in the Achill Island Hotel.

In ten minutes I packed a small bag and changed out of my suit into a pair of corduroy slacks, a sweater and a tweed jacket. Clothes suitable for the country. I thought of calling ahead

to make a reservation until I remembered it was the off-season. With the economy still underwater, the hotel was probably all but vacant.

On my way out I checked my mail and slipped the one letter in the box into my jacket pocket. Mail could wait.

Once beyond the Dublin suburbs, the hour and a half drive to County Mayo is seldom punctuated by anything larger than the single pub needed by every farming community. On that lonely stretch of EU improved road, I consoled myself that although I was temporarily jobless I at least still had Danielle. Half way to the west coast my iPhone pinged the receipt of a text message. I pulled over to the shoulder of the deserted road.

The text message was from Danielle: 'Mike, I can't do this any longer. I've flown back and forth across the Atlantic waiting for you to commit. You haven't. I'm done. Good-bye.'



## CHAPTER TWO

The familiar late November Dublin sky had long been threatened by a low heavy overcast even before I reached the outer suburbs; now the first drops of what promised to be steady rain spattered my windshield. I depressed the clutch, pushed the gear lever into first and drove off the shoulder into the empty road. I drove west on automatic pilot. I continued west on automatic pilot. Time passed. I turned north in Westport on the road to the Achill Island Causeway, and only came to when I passed on my right the stained glass of the enormous west end of Newport Cathedral. I crossed the river and drove into the driveway of Newport House, once an English Manor House, now a hotel catering to what remained of the English, high Tory upper middle class. I parked the car in the empty lot and carried my bag up the stone steps into the foyer.

I set the bag down on the tile floor next to the check-in counter. A tall woman, I thought about forty, sat at a terminal with her back half to me.

“Hello,” I said.

She turned and jumped to her feet. “Jesus! You nearly scared the life out of me.”

“I beg your pardon. Do you have a room?”

“Do we have a room . . . I’m afraid you’re our only guest. The hotel’s as dead as Monday mass. How long will you be staying, Mr. . . .?”

“Alexander. Michael Alexander. I’m not sure. A day or two, maybe three.” She looked at me as if expecting an explanation. I said, “I’m taking a short holiday.”

“You sound like a Yank.”

“I am. But I work in Dublin.” I thought: it’s not exactly a lie, I did work there until a couple of hours ago.

“Here’s the register. I’ll give you the Michael Collins suite, so you can sleep in a room with your own name. Mine’s Mary Nolan. I’m the manager. We’re a bit short-handed so you’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

She grabbed the bag out of my hand and preceded me up the curving staircase, complete with mahogany banisters and balustrades. She wore a long, loose, white uniform. Seen from behind and two steps below she loomed even taller than she was, one of those Irishwomen who go on forever, long-legged and full-breasted. We reached the upper landing. She led me down several corridors to a double door. “This is one of our best suites,” she said, turning the key. We walked into a medium-sized room with low oak wainscoting and worn oriental carpets on the floor. A watery light filtered through a window above a window seat. Two wing-backed chairs sat lonely in the corners. Past an archway on my left I saw a sitting room that looked little used and on my right was a door I assumed opened to the bathroom. Directly in front stood a four poster. Antique four posters can be surprisingly small. This one was king-size. It was covered by a modern duvet, for which I was thankful, but the mattress looked slightly concave.

Nolan turned around. Her face was angular, her cheekbones high, her nose aquiline and her eyes set wide. Her lips were lively when she smiled. She smiled now. “Sure,” she said, “nothing but the best of old Irish luxury for our only guest.”

Sex appeal is not always rational. A woman can look like nothing at all and have enormous sex appeal. Mary Nolan’s every feature was a millimeter away from exaggeration but

it did not matter. She was stunning. We seemed to be alone. There wasn't a soul in sight nor a sound to be heard down any of those corridors or stairways or landings. She showed me every detail of the Michael Collins suite, and then she unpacked my bag while we talked of this and that. She quickly discovered that I'd come up on a whim, was alone and had no plans.

"Would you like me to show you around the town tonight?" she said.

It was my turn to smile. "Is there much to see?"

"No. But there's a restaurant only a few minutes away where you can buy a decent plate of mussels, and we've got several pubs. We can probably find you a little crack."

I hadn't come for 'a little crack', I'd come for a quiet walk over a hill, or on a beach. Although in my youth no saint, I have never been promiscuous. I'd been faithful to Danielle Cleary for the three years we'd been conducting our long-distance affair. I couldn't remember when I'd last picked up a casual date and I'd never accepted an invitation from the manager of a deserted hotel on a grey day in County Mayo. I looked out the bedroom window. It had begun to rain.

"Alright," I said. "When do you get off duty?"

"It's February, the whole country's broke and you're the only customer in sight. Meet me in the bar at six. I'll pour us both a drink and then we'll head to Westport. I think the Grace O'Malley is still open for dinner."

Mary Nolan left the room and once again alone, I walked to the window. It was raining steadily, as far as I knew throughout County Mayo and certainly over Achill Island.

Danielle Cleary and I first made love in the Achill Island Hotel overlooking the North Atlantic. As usual on Achill it was raining:

"Westron wind, when will thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again."

Danielle was a Harvard trained economist but her first degree was in English. She was fond of quoting from a novel of L.P. Hartley's or of reciting a scrap of Middle English verse to add humor or definition to the Irish scene.

She was Boston Irish, of a lively, gay, womanly temperament, and of womanly figure. She was a striking brunette with a complexion like milk and a powerful sexual attraction. She was also the recently divorced wife of my oldest friend.

Richard Bergman and I grew up together in the small Central California city of Fresno. Both our fathers died in our early teens so we relied on stipends from the Reserve Officer Training Corps to pay our way through UCLA. We took our time in grad school, I studying economics, he foreign affairs. We graduated just in time to serve our mandatory four years in the Air Force at the start of the first Bush Iraq war. Reserve officers were the first to leave active service after the war, and while I began my career in international development banking, Richard joined the U.S. Commerce Department as a foreign service officer. Our careers kept us moving but we always remained in touch.

1 Richard married late, at forty; I have never married. Danielle divorced him when he was serving in the U.S. Consulate at Istanbul. Following her divorce she moved to New York City and took a job as senior consultant at the Libertarian-leaning American Venture Institute.

I had always found her attractive, intellectually and physically. She was the reason why, after four years in London, I took a job at a Dublin bank. I thought that she wouldn't be able to resist Dublin's easy, Catholic charm. After two platonic visits, I drove her straight from the Dublin Airport across the country to County Mayo and over the causeway to Achill Island. Before the night was over I had fallen in love.

Unfortunately, I neglected to tell Danielle that, in so many words. I assumed, like many men who remain, for one reason or another, uncommitted at my age, that actions speak louder than words.

Westport was as quiet as the first time I saw it, and now greatly over built on spec, but Nolan's restaurant was still open. Over plates of mussels Mary and I got acquainted. She learned that I'd worked in international finance for over twenty years, much of that time in the developing, now largely developed, world. I'd come to Ireland because I thought I saw there, despite the boom, a cultural innocence which appealed to my increasing nostalgia. I learned that she had worked in the hotel industry in Dublin but had tired of what she called 'the west Brits', and took the job of manager of Newport House just before the financial meltdown. "It's a good place to be," she said, "especially when every Dubliner who's been pulling in the money and living like the rich is now walking the streets without a penny to their name." She expertly pulled a mussel from its shell. "We had a Yank guest a few months ago, a psychologist, who told me the Irish here out west are 'authentic'. I had no time for her but later I thought I understood what she meant. People here know who they are."

After dinner we drove back to Newport, where we could drink and be two minutes from the hotel.

I was long familiar with Irish pub culture. My first exposure was in the mid-eighties, before the economic boom, when an Irish colleague asked me to read at his wedding. I couldn't believe how much everyone drank. I put it down to desperation. In those days genteel poverty was the norm and it wasn't always so genteel: in the country you could still find pockets of hunger. But a decade of investment by the EU in infrastructure and education, along with low corporate taxes, had created an economic powerhouse. By the late nineties everything had changed. Even the Irish drinking habits changed.

They drank even more.

Successful expatriates enjoy the cross-cultural dance and I was no exception. The Irish dating game, the pre-bed scene and in fact all Irish social and sex life involves the pub. Getting occasionally dead drunk is considered 'good crack'. I joined in as far as I thought prudent, while remaining an American banker. American bankers do not get dead drunk in public. Over time I'd built up a substantial tolerance to alcohol. I'd never be able to out-drink Mary Nolan, but I could appear to almost keep up.

In Newport Mary took me to the Granuaile. It was dark and poky with benches which no one else seemed to mind but which I found uncomfortable. Mary was a local girl, born on Achill Island, and she knew everyone and everyone knew her. She greeted the owner behind the bar and ordered two whiskeys and lagers. We took seats in a nearby corner. As everywhere business was down. A few couples and widows sat around and two young boys, teenagers, sat together holding pints in their hands and guitars over their knees. My heart sank. It was to be a musical evening.

The boys started out with *I'll Drink From Dusk to Dawn*, and followed it with the more somber, *Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye*. As guitarists they were limited to three chords and an

inversion and their voices were loud, usually on-key but without charm. It was entertainment out of a tourist brochure—the brochures are accurate—but I'd seen and heard it more often than any tourist, and drunken amateur guitar music was now just drunken amateur guitar music to me. I was a lone critic. The locals loved it and as the singing continued more and more joined in.

Mary took out a Silk Cut and asked me for a light. I don't smoke so she bummed a light off another guest. Cigarettes had been banned in Irish pubs for years but we were almost as far west as you could get and the air inside was grey.

She said, "Those boys aren't yet eighteen, they shouldn't by rights be drinking. But don't you think they've earned their pints?"

We sat close together and one of her long legs pressed against mine. I said, "I expect they have."

"Even with all our troubles, it's still a fine night, isn't it?"

The boys took an intermission and that's when we noticed a drunk having an argument at the bar. He was a local about my age, wearing a suit that looked like it had been worn every day for months. He'd had a few drinks and wanted more, but not at the pub: he was asking the bartender to sell him a bottle. He had the expression of a man whose life had taught him not to expect too much but for some reason he thought he deserved his bottle and the illegality didn't bother him. He wheedled and pleaded and leant over the bar in a personal appeal. The bartender washed and dried his glasses. He looked exasperated. Mary and I sat nearby. We heard him say, "Paddy, you know I can't. Now you've had enough, you know you have, you've had too much already; why don't you go home?"

Mary said, "For God's sake, why doesn't he sell him the bottle?"

The drunk straightened and swayed; he looked like he was trying to figure out another tack. Then Mary stood up and in one long step reached the bar—she was taller than either of the men—and told the bartender, "You know Paddy and you've sold him a bottle before."

The bartender just said, "Now Mary..."

"For fuck's sake, why can't you?"

He kept his voice low; how many of these conversations had he had? He said, "Don't go telling me how to run my own business."

"Oh sure you're a great man at business."

"Ask your man there if I should pass a bottle over the counter."

She looked at me with a dare in her eye. "What do you say?"

I raised my hands in surrender.

She grimaced and turned back to the bartender. "Do you take your lead from foreigners? Like our own sorry government? Or are you your own man?"

"I'm not taking his money for a bottle. Not in front of the whole pub."

Mary laughed. "They're all locals and he's a yank." She reached into her pocket. "Here, take mine." But her hand came out empty. "Michael, do you have a tenner?"

She was asking me to break the law, and in public at that. Her suggestion was embarrassing and unsuited to my position . . . until I recalled that I no longer had a position. The whole pub stared at me. I pulled out my wallet, withdrew the bill, and handed it to her. I heard behind me a "Good man!" and a few claps and laughs. The bartender reached under the counter for a bottle as I turned and sat down. Mary sat back down beside me. The drunk touched his hat to her as he passed on his way out.

She put her hand on mine. “Relax,” she said, “relax—why, you’ve got your hand in a fist like you want to throw it at someone. I’m sorry I had to ask you but if you knew him, you’d understand. He was mentioned—not by name but everyone in town knew who it was, it was disgraceful they printed it—in the McGinnis Report on the Brothers of Charity in Westport.”

I didn’t remember the McGinnis Report but it was just one of many with similar titles. Any talk in Ireland of a report coupled with a religious order was bound to mean one thing: sexual abuse. As pedophiles the Irish clergy are in a class by themselves.

“They tied him to a cross,” she whispered. I tried to remember how much wine we’d had at dinner. Surely not more than a bottle between us? “They did it in the presbytery. The parish priest and three brothers. And all the time everyone attending mass every Sunday and every holy day of obligation. Were we fools, Michael? Were we just the dumb Irish?”

She stared down at her pint. I’d witnessed the scene again and again among friends and colleagues and even total strangers in Dublin. The church had been more than an institution, it had been a major part of the national identity. I was raised Catholic, but an American Catholic—Catholic lite. And I’d been an atheist my whole adult life. Before the recent reports, Irish Catholicism had appeared to me quaint, harmless, part of the whole nostalgic charm. Now it was a scandal and a national obsession.

The guitarists strummed a chord, almost in unison. Someone gave a shout and the entertainment resumed. The song was *Won’t You Come With Me?* Mary Nolan perked up immediately, and began to sing along:

I met a maid at the waterside  
Gutting the herring clean.  
She took my hand, laid down her knife.  
As we walked along the beach.

I took her gently in my arms  
Our bodies rolling in the sand.  
When she pulled the knife out of my side  
My body stopped lurching at last.

The audience clapped and Mary sat back laughing. “One of my favorites,” she said. “But don’t worry, you’re safe with me.”

We stayed for two more drinks and several songs, until finally to my relief she asked if I was ready to go. We reached the hotel in six minutes and a minute later, she leading the way, we reached the Michael Collins suite. She closed the door behind us and gave me an arch smile. Then she knelt down in front of me.

In retrospect I can come up with several psychological and physical excuses for my behavior. Most men wouldn’t see what there was to excuse. Is it reasonable to blame someone, in my situation, who takes love when it’s offered? Maybe it wasn’t admirable, but it was human.

In bed she was extravagantly giving. How much was the drink I’ll never know. Alcohol usually releases inhibitions. In her case it led to an aggressive surrender and in mine—I joined in and played my role. It wasn’t an approach that led to lengthy love making; the more sedate or repressed might not even call it that. It was passionate and we both gave and got what we wanted, at that time.

We finished and she collapsed onto the bed and fell immediately into a deep sleep, face down, without even turning over. I lay beside her, facing away. In a minute I too was asleep.

And I did what I almost never do. I dreamt.

I dreamt I lay in bed not with Mary Nolan but with Danielle. I couldn't see her face but I didn't need to: I recognized the feel of every inch of her body. We lay together in what she called the spoon position. She pressed warmly against me. I moved a little away, turned her onto her back and went down on her.

I must have moved on the bed as in the dream, for I half-awoke, confused. I took a deep breath and gagged, wide-awake. The stench of liquor, of beer and whisky, overwhelmed any smell of sex. A dim bulb almost extinguished by its shade still glowed on a nightstand. I picked up my iPhone. Just after three. I sat up and looked at Mary. Her hair lay in dank strands over her face; she breathed heavily through her half-open mouth.

A damp chill lay on the room. I straightened the blanket over my partner of the evening, tucking her in, then pulled on my clothes, slipped on my shoes and padded through the quiet corridors, across the landings and down the dark stairs to the ground floor.

The sitting room off the foyer was long, high-ceilinged and crowded with sofas, chairs and tables; I switched on a table lamp near the stone fireplace and settled into an armchair. It was upholstered in a faded floral print. The lamplight glinted on a glass case over the mantel; within I could just make out the grey skin of the mummified pike caught and stuffed (according to the brass plate) by Major Thompson ninety years back. He must have been a stubborn and probably belligerent Englishman to have still been fishing in Mayo during the Troubles. Heavily framed sporting scenes, similar to those in my Dublin apartment, hung elsewhere in the shadows. Beside me, wine-red bars ran down the cream wallpaper. I used to think the design elegant. Perhaps it was the solitude and the hour, or maybe the alcohol, but the bars now suggested confinement. I passed my fingers down the pattern. The linen paper felt damp. It was the west of Ireland and of course the night was heavy with rain. The lamplight caught the runnels of water down the windows.

I felt entombed in a dead nostalgia.

The furniture needed to be thrown out with the pike. What was the famous Irish pub culture? Alcoholism, sloppy music and a drunk taking home a bottle. Irish Catholicism stood revealed: thousands of children abused over decades. The church symbol? Panting seminarians crowding closer around a boy tied naked to a cross. Even the economic boom was rotten. Zero regulation, greed and crony capitalism ended in a bust worse than the States'. Instead of a recession, a full-blown depression. America had its problems, but if right-wing blowhards ranted drunk on live TV, the president at least was sober. In Ireland the Prime Minister rambled drunk while live on-the-air.

I shoved my chilly hands into my jacket pockets and felt an envelope. I pulled it out. It was the letter I'd received that morning in Dublin. A plain white envelope with no return address, bearing a Turkish stamp and an Istanbul postmark. The date on the postmark was two months old—on top of the recession, we'd had an Irish postal strike. I tore it open.

I unfolded the single typed page on U.S. Commerce Department letterhead. A glance showed me it was from my old friend Richard Bergman, a Foreign Service Officer in Commerce. Its sense of urgency was new, as was his call to remembrance. We'd grown up together in the San Joaquin valley of California, a forgettable place that anyone with ambition left.

His letter was an invitation to escape.

There was a plane from Dublin to London every hour and from there I could choose a variety of flights to Istanbul. I had no office to report to and I had money in the bank.

First I had to leave Mary Nolan a note, a letter of explanation. I didn't know what she expected, but it certainly wasn't waking up alone in the morning in the Michael Collins' suite. So I climbed back up the carpeted stairs, found some hotel stationery and wrote a thank you note for a lovely evening. I added that unfortunately I had to fly to Istanbul on business but hoped to see her again soon.

I was not happy with what I'd written. I was grateful to her for befriending me, if that's not too euphemistic a way of describing our evening, and I did not want to hurt her. I wanted to end my letter in some way that was kind without being condescending. But I've never been fluent at expressing emotion. I packed my bag, left the letter on the pillow beside her—she was still sound asleep—and let myself out.

In the car I turned on the windshield wipers and headed east, into the darkness toward Dublin. A connecting flight to London, then Istanbul.

## CHAPTER THREE

I made an Aer Lingus flight that arrived at Heathrow before ten a.m. After changing terminals I booked a direct flight on Turkish Air for early afternoon and then called my travel agent back in Dublin. I told him I was on a private trip to Istanbul and wanted a hotel for a couple of days, and to charge it to my personal account. He said he'd call me back shortly. By that time I was ravenous. I made my way to Chez Gerard, by habit bought myself a copy of *The Financial Times*, and ordered a traditional English breakfast, complete with eggs, bacon, sausage, beans, toast and fried tomatoes. Mid-way through, my agent called me back with a hotel reservation. I finished the meal but left the tomatoes.

Turkish Airlines is one of the better European carriers. I dozed in business class and woke on approach as the sun was setting.

I'd read of course of Turkey's economic miracle under what financial journalists call the 'mildly Islamic' regime. It was over a decade since I'd visited Istanbul, and then I'd had to wake up the attendant sleeping on a mattress on the floor behind the immigration counter of the sixties era terminal, to give him my ten US dollar—cash only—entry fee. So I was impressed by Atatürk Airport's gleaming new international terminal—more modern and passenger-friendly than anything at Heathrow. I withdrew some Lira at an ATM then grabbed a taxi. I was far south of Ireland but still north of the Mediterranean and a light snow brushed the cab's windscreen. I congratulated myself on stopping at my apartment on my way to the Dublin airport, to change into a suit and pick up my overcoat. I was not over dressed.

The Pera Palace Hotel turned out to be the oldest luxury hotel in the city, but recently restored. The foyer was heavily ornate and dead empty of guests. My reception clerk was a young woman with perfect English and a correct manner. I reflected that the failed coup and subsequent purges, and the continuing terrorist attacks had probably been bad for business. A porter took my bag and led me into a perfectly preserved antique elevator that lifted us to the fourth floor. My room was larger than any London hotel room I'd ever stayed in. Fittings and furniture were all new. I drew the curtains, opened the balcony door and stepped out. In the distance the lights of the ships rounding the Golden Horn twinkled like stars over the Bosphorus. I admired the scene but something nagged me, something was missing. Then I identified it: the sickly sweet smell of lignite that a decade ago formed an inescapable part of the atmosphere, was gone. Istanbul no longer burned soft brown coal. A curtain of snow came down and I went back in. I took a shower and changed, had a light dinner downstairs and then climbed into bed.

I awoke in a dark room under a heavy duvet. I've woken up too often in hotel rooms to feel panic during that first moment when memory has still to regroup. The disorientation came when I recalled, one leg out of bed, that I was not on a business trip; that I didn't have an office or a client or an appointment to go to; that I was, for the first time in my adult life, unemployed. I froze on the edge of the bed. Then I remembered why I was there. I stood and drew the curtains—the damp grey light was better than darkness—pulled on my clothes and ordered breakfast. After my second cup of coffee I called the concierge. The US Embassy would be in the capital, Ankara, so I asked for the number of the US Consulate in Istanbul. I got through to



an automated answering service. The menu was long with many choices and sub-menus, none of which led to an consular officer. It took me half an hour to reach a human being and he was a Turkish local hire. I explained who I was and who I wanted to speak to. He said he'd have Mr. Bergman call me back. When? Soon, he hoped. How soon? He could not say.

The Pera Palace was luxurious but I was beginning to feel cooped up so I put on my overcoat and went out for a walk. It was blustery and frigid and overcast. The street was narrow and the few pedestrians slipped through the crawling traffic. Proprietors stared gloomily out from inside their doorways. A block further, a group of Gulf Arabs in new suits loitered outside the weatherworn façade of a cheaper hotel than mine. After another block I gave up and returned to the Pera Palace. No one had called. I opened my laptop and checked my e-mail. My bank's HR department had a number of forms they wanted me to sign; I could come in or they could e-mail them. Several of my former staff had sent expressions of gratitude and best wishes for my future. There was nothing further from Danielle.

Then the telephone rang. I picked it up. An American voice identified himself as Brian Hoover, the Deputy Economic Officer. I introduced myself and told him I wanted to talk to Richard Bergman. After a pause, Hoover told me that Mr. Bergman was out of town.

"I'm sorry to hear he's away," I said. "I'm an old friend of Richard's and I've come from Dublin at his request to meet him. When do you expect him back?"

"I'm not sure . . . you say you're an old friend?"

"Yes." I hadn't seen him for years. But I thought back, all the decades back, to the hot summers in California's San Joaquin valley. I said, "We practically grew up together."

"If you are a friend of Bergman's, the Consul General, Mr. Jones, would be happy to you. Are you available this afternoon?"

"Yes, I am."

"Mr. Jones can meet you at the Archaeology Museum, It's by the Topkapı Palace."

"Will I find him at the entrance?"

"Just inside, to the left. In front of the Alexander Sarcophagus. You can't miss it. He'll be the one in the blue suit. Will one o'clock work?"

I told him it would, and hung up.

A freezing drizzle slanted down in front of the museum. Its four marble columns and pediment would have reminded me of Washington had the stonework been white. But it was grey with dirt and soot, as grey as the stone of my Dublin bank. Halfway down the long foyer I looked through an archway on my left and saw a man in a black suit standing in front of a gigantic stone tomb. Other than myself he was the only person in sight. Spotlights lit the tomb but he was half in shadow; his suit could be navy blue. I walked in and said, "Mr. Jones?"

He turned and held out his hand, "Gerald Jones, I'm the Consul General here." He looked in his late thirties, a little below average in height, plump. His face was round, his cheeks bulging as if a milk chocolate sat in each. The neatly trimmed but full mustache completed the San Francisco Castro Street look. He looked so gaily happy to meet me, I wondered in fact if he was gay. American diplomats of course come in all shapes, genders and sexual preferences. I just hoped he'd be helpful.

"Mr. Alexander," he said. "A good place to meet, don't you think?"

I nodded. "Where is everybody?"

"The school children are in school, the tourists are at lunch. Is this your first time in Istanbul?"

“The first time for many years.”

“Well, what do you think of your namesake’s final resting place?”

We turned to it. The sarcophagus was not the kind of museum artifact that needed curator’s notes to admire. It grabbed the attention. Battle scenes covered the marble. Fluid figures of mounted horsemen and cavalry galloped, ran and stumbled in front of my eyes; one man threw a spear while his intended victim tried to protect his head with his arm; another was trampled underfoot. Expressions were realistic rather than stylized: faces showed fear, determination, despair. Men and animals stood out in such deep relief they seemed to jump from the marble. I’d seen many tombs and statuary in many museums, but I’d never seen stone as alive as this.

“Remarkable,” I said.

“Yes. This figure,” he pointed to a horseman on the left, “is thought to be Alexander himself. His helmet is a lion’s head. This other mounted figure, wearing a metal or leather helmet, is thought to be Hephaestion.”

“Who was he?”

“His closest friend, his companion from childhood. His lover.”

I thought it an odd detail to volunteer. He said, “The past is a foreign country. Twenty-four hundred years ago the Greeks had different hangups than ours. How long have you known Richard?”

It was an distracting shift, like a student driver on a manual transmission.

“Since high school. We grew up together in the same town in central California.”

“So you’ve kept up?”

“Not really. Not for some time.”

“But he invited you to Istanbul?”

“Yes.”

“Did he say why?”

In my line of work I’ve usually been the interrogator, not the interrogated. I said, “He wanted to reconnect. Where is he, and when do you expect him back?”

Jones paused. He glanced back at the tomb. I followed his eyes. I noticed for the first time that Hephaestion was riding, not only bareback, but nude. Jones said, “Richard was granted emergency leave to visit his very aged mother in California. She is, or at least was, dying. We’ve asked the assisted living facility where she resides to notify us in case of her death; we haven’t heard from them yet.”

“You mean . . . you haven’t heard from Richard?”

“No, we have not.”

“For how long?”

“He was given a month’s leave. Of course for a man of his seniority, and in a family emergency, the Commerce Department is flexible. But we haven’t heard a word from him since he left. He doesn’t reply to his e-mails, he doesn’t answer his cellphone.”

I repeated, “For how long?”

“Seven weeks. Going on eight.”

“Has he done anything like this before?”

“No.”

“Did you have any indications. . . ?”

Jones sighed. “We think he’s been drinking heavily for some time.”

“His letter was the first I’d heard from him for at least a year.” I thought back. He’d been out of touch since Danielle and I had become lovers, but he’d always had a drink in his hand. I said, “He drank socially. He spent a lot of his career in some pretty seedy assignments. He had a rough divorce . . . it’s conceivable he developed a drinking problem.”

“We think he’s been battling depression as well. We brought in a security consultant to audit Richard’s recent work. Normally we’d never take such a step, but he’s not a junior officer and we need to get a handle on why he’s disappeared. He was seeing, against department policy, a doctor unaffiliated with the consulate. We found her. Her son’s a dual national and she was eager to cooperate with us. She had prescribed an opioid, something no Stateside or embassy physician would have prescribed. Addictive.”

I had nothing to say to that.

“What do you do, Mr. Alexander? Where are you based?”

“I live in Dublin. I am—was—a corporate investment banker. I specialize in emerging markets. Since Monday I’m out of work. I’m a delayed victim of the Irish economic meltdown.”

I thought I’d replied in a steady, slightly ironic tone, but Jones looked down. “I’m sorry,” he said. It should have made him more likeable, but I wasn’t used to being the object of sympathy.

Jones looked up. “Maybe you can help your friend.”

“How?”

“Help us find him.”

“You’ve painted a picture of a clinically depressed alcoholic. Why do you want him back?”

He looked surprised. “He may have a drinking problem, he may even be clinically depressed, but he’s a senior man in the department. We look after our own, Mr. Alexander. To be truthful, there is another reason, although it’s speculative. Do you remember a man named Snowden and The Washington Post?”

You can’t have a banking career in emerging markets without keeping up with politics. “Yes. He revealed that the NSA had been wiretapping Americans and foreign nationals.”

“That’s right. What do you think of that activity?”

“It’s the NSA’s job. Snowden should be prosecuted.”

Jones looked around. We were still alone. “That Turkish doctor wasn’t the only thing the security audit turned up. Richard was accessing a lot of stuff he didn’t need: confidential political reports; cables between Washington and the political section; démarches from the ambassador to the Turkish foreign minister.”

“It’s a little hard to believe.”

“I agree. And these kinds of secrets aren’t really very secret. We don’t know what it means.”

“In that case. . . .”

A seizure of impatience convulsed his too-smooth face. Maybe he was a passive-aggressive type. “You’re still an American citizen, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Richard has been a public servant for over twenty years. I’ve been in for thirteen. In thirteen years you do a lot of things—implement policies, and so on—that you’d rather not, even that you object to strongly. Unless you’re just a time-server, you stay in because you figure, by

the end of your career, you'll be able to do more good than bad." He turned half-away, the passion already fading—but leaving more authority. "I've been tasked with finding your friend. It's my job. It's one of the positives, Mr. Alexander."

A stranger walked in, walked slowly around the marble monument, and then away through an arch. Jones asked, "When did you last visit California, your old home, your family?"

"Both my parents are dead. I was an only child. I own no property in the States, or for that matter anywhere. I was last in California, oh, probably ten years ago." It sounded almost like I was on the run. I said, "I've been a professional expatriate for most of my life."

"We're all professional expatriates in the Foreign Service. Maybe this is an opportunity for you. Do you have time to visit California? The town Richard's mother is living in is called Clovis. I understand it's quite small."

"It used to be a farming community." It was hard to picture Clovis while standing in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, but I tried. A little farming community well outside of Fresno, itself not large. Flat and sandy with a lonely main street and sandy orange groves under the blazing sun, dependent on irrigation from depression-era dams in the foothills. A quiet place, where if Mrs. Bergman was still living, Richard might be hanging around.

Thirty years younger I'd left it with relief. But where else did anyone, now, want me to go? And wouldn't I, like Mr. Jones, be doing something worthwhile?

I said, "What should I tell him, if I find him?"

"He's not formally AWOL—not yet. We just want him back. Tell him to get in touch. Tell him . . . he still has a place here, Mr. Alexander."

We exchanged cards and he dropped me off at my Hotel.

#

Before crossing the Atlantic I had to return to Dublin. I still had the remains of a life there, of acquaintances and a short list of obligations. I thought I should tie up loose ends before heading back to the US for I didn't know how long. I headed to the hotel's reception desk to see about booking a flight to Dublin. They directed me to the hotel's travel agent.

She was reading a paperback by Hemingway. It was "The Sun Also Rises". I took a seat at her desk and she snapped the book shut.

"How can I help you?"

I was glad to see a young Turkish girl in Istanbul taking an interest in the greatest American literary icon of the twentieth century. I said, approvingly, "I see you are reading Hemingway in English."

"Yes, business has been slow but it has given me time for reading. I am studying English at Istanbul University, with a minor in Psychology. Do you admire Hemingway?"

I answered, truthfully, "I think I read him once as an undergraduate. In an American Literature course. I majored in economics. What do you think of him?"

"I think he is early 20th century, very American. He is perfect for a Turkish student of English, like me. He writes using short sentences. Even commas are rare, I have found no semi-colons. It is almost too simple English. There lacks, how do you say, a rhythm. It is like a man without hair."

I thought she was looking for a word. I supplied it: "You mean, it is too bald."

“Yes. And his men! They are like Turks, not modern Turks, like old-fashioned Turks, from Anatolia.” Her face expressed distaste.

I smiled. “What are the characteristics of Hemingway’s old-fashioned American men?”

“They are stupid. They like to drink. They are always drinking. Hemingway himself was an alcoholic. In ‘Death in the Afternoon’ he wrote about bull-fighters so lovingly—their faces, their figures, their clothes—he wrote like a gay man. In ‘A Moveable Feast’ he despises lesbians. There is almost no sex in Hemingway’s books. In fact, I don’t think there is any sex. His men are machismo, but they don’t have sex. I have read a lot about Hemingway. His second wife was an American photojournalist, and she wrote that he preferred the company of men. He was married four times. I think he was in denial about his own homosexuality. Psychologically, I think he suffered from Avoidant Attachment Disorder.”

If I had thought of Hemingway at all, over the past thirty years, I had assumed he was the greatest American author of the 20th century. It was surprising to hear this young Turkish woman explode this American literary icon.

“Well,” I said, “Hemingway probably wrote most of his novels from 1920 to 1950. America was a more conservative nation then. Readers didn’t expect sex scenes, certainly not lesbian or homosexual sex scenes. In fact, Americans of that period thought of Hemingway as a man’s man.” I paused. ‘Man’s man’ was an old expression. In the LGBT age, it could be seen as ambiguous.

“At any rate, Hemingway was a professional novelist. He made his living by selling books. He was interested in selling to a mass market, and he succeeded. He won a Nobel prize for literature. So he couldn’t have been all that bad.”

She said, “I am afraid I have offended you.” But her expression was not sincere. I reflected that she was thirty years younger than I. She would no doubt consider any denial of her offensiveness as simply an older adult’s tolerant superiority.

So I just said, “I’m not offended.”

She looked at me professionally, politely, but without warmth. “How can I help you?”

She booked the flight in no time. I was her only customer and we both had time on our hands. I noticed on her desk a flyer promoting the history of the hotel. I asked a question or two; when she suggested she show me the Mustafa Kemal Atatürk room upstairs, I agreed.

Atatürk, the Turkish general who defeated the British at Gallipoli and subsequently founded modern Turkey, spent many nights at the hotel between 1917 and his death from alcoholism in ’38. He always stayed in room 101. A simple suite of two rooms and a bathroom, it was now a shrine. Of course it had been freshened up, but not recently. The carpet felt thin underfoot. The walls were painted an indistinct, feminine hue; the agent described it as sunrise pink, “His favorite color.” The period furniture was maintained but had the dark patina of age. Decrepit personal mementoes lay safely under glass. A yellowed ivory knife and fork, a cracked leather spectacle case, a fragile linen shirt: artifacts found in a well-sealed, recently reopened tomb. The bed was definitely period. It looked like the bed I’d made love on, in Newport House.

“Yes,” she said, “it is small. Of course, Atatürk had a position to keep up, he was the president of the country. But he did not love luxury.” She bent over and passed her hand over the coverlet, smoothing a wrinkle, like a maid, or a lover. Her close-cropped hair was as black as her tailored outfit; her complexion, although swarthy, shone pale by comparison. As she leant over, her black uniform stretched tight over her hips. She said, “It is not too small for two.”

“Do you think it’s the original mattress?”

She regarded the bed with a more ambivalent expression. “It is possible.” She looked at me. “You do not admire antiques?”

“This is my only day in Istanbul. I leave tomorrow. So far, I’ve seen Alexander’s tomb in the Archaeology Museum, and the Atatürk room.”

“Istanbul is not a museum.” She smiled. “Our night life is cosmopolitan. Not at all antique. Would you like me to book you a ticket to a club, tonight?”

I was at least twenty-five years older than she, probably more. Maybe it was a reaction to the dust and to the gloom that made me ask, “Will you accompany me?”

She considered for a moment. “I will accompany you to Osman club. I think it is suitable. Meet me at eight o’clock outside the hotel.”

#

At first I didn’t see her when I walked out the door, but she saw me. She called my name out of the dark a little way up the street. Probably there was a hotel rule against fraternizing with guests. I joined her. It was freezing and she had a cab waiting. She’d changed her outfit but it was still all black.

Our driver took a short but circuitous route through a neighborhood that looked more down-at-heel by the minute, finally stopping opposite a red-painted wall and a neon sign that said ‘Osman’. I paid the driver and we got out. My companion waved and shouted something to a small group of young people standing outside a bar across the street, then told me to follow her in.

She was right: there was nothing antique about the club. It was all chrome and glass and plush carpet, with two tiers of tables looking down at the stage. Lighting was subdued but the music wasn’t. The crowd looked well-heeled. A tall woman with a realistic smile met us; my agent spoke to her, then turned to me.

“The hotel has already paid the cover charge and put it on your bill. This lady is your hostess. Tonight the show is from Berlin. German culture is popular just now. If it is too loud,” she indicated a dark alcove behind us, “you can have a drink in the bar, where it is more quiet.” She held out her hand. Surprised, I took it lightly. She said, her diction only now going slightly astray, “I wish you enjoyment of the evening. Goodbye.” Her fingers slipped from mine and before I could remonstrate she was gone.

The hostess showed me to a table and asked if I cared for a drink. The table was without a menu and I was unsure what to order in an Istanbul nightclub. “Can you recommend a local cocktail?”

She said, “Something not too strong?”

“Sure.”

“I will order a Turkish blood.” She returned in a few minutes with a champagne glass full of what I later learned was champagne and burgundy. It was not disagreeable but neither was it very good. I sipped it feeling a little conned and a little lonely.

I had two fingers left of the drink when a woman wearing a business-like grey suit appeared and said, “Excuse me. Are you alone?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Do you mind if I join you? This table has a good view.”

I rose to my feet. “Please do.”

She sat down. She looked in her early forties. She was attractive in a similar way as Danielle: brunette, mature, professional. But she was more formal. I noticed her looking at my glass and asked if she’d care for a drink; she nodded and I waved to the waitress. She ordered a cosmopolitan.

“What are you drinking?” she said.

“It’s called Turkish blood.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I am Turkish, but I have never heard of that drink.”

We got acquainted. She was friendly but not effusive, which I appreciated. Her name was Çigdem and she was a buyer for an old-fashioned trading company of the kind that’s still common in the Near and Middle East. She travelled frequently and even knew Dublin. She handed me her card; it gave her name and contact information under the heading: ‘Import/Export’. Her English was so good I asked her where she’d learned it; she’d studied in Washington.

I’d told her little yet about myself when the lights began to dim. “I came tonight,” she said, “to learn something about Wagner.”

“Wagner?”

“The show is from Berlin. It is a post-modern German interpretation of *The Ring*.”

What appeared to be white smoke but was probably just vapor from dry ice, began to roll from the wings onto the stage. A hard, throbbing music set our table vibrating; beneath the beat I recognized a mélange of Wagnerian motifs. Out of the vapor emerged a troupe of women dancers, most in tight costumes distantly suggestive of the Bayreuth operas. Presently a short woman in tights emerged, holding a microphone. Traversing the stage to her own slow beat, she recited a monotone monologue intermittently audible above the throb.

After a few minutes the monologue and dance gave way to valkyries straddling motorcycles, then to another monologue spoken against a projection of clips from ancient German silent films—I recognized *Caligari*.

I felt I was going deaf and numb. I turned to Çigdem and indicated the bar. She nodded. We left the table and made our way down and back, through padded swing doors into the relative quiet of a dark and almost deserted lounge. We took a booth and I ordered two more cosmopolitans.

I said, “I don’t think you’ll learn much about Wagner from that.”

“Are you familiar with his work?”

“I admit it’s rare, but occasionally you’ll run into a banker who’s acquired some culture.”

“Atatürk said, ‘Culture is the foundation of our country.’”

“I’ll drink to that.” She recoiled slightly; I realized my remark had been insufficiently respectful. I lifted my glass and said, “Let me propose a toast to Mustafa Kemal.” She recovered, smiled, and kissed the rim of her glass to mine.

By our second refill she was expressing an interest in me and in what I was doing in Istanbul. The drinks were strong, she was an attractive woman, and I opened up. I told her about Richard’s letter and his urgent summons to join him in Istanbul. After I related my meeting at the museum, she asked, “What is your friend’s name?”

“Richard Bergman.”

“I have met him. I am sure I have.”

“How?”

“I have contacts at your embassy in Ankara—my company does export business to the US. I am sometimes also invited to functions at the consulate here, in Istanbul. He is the commercial attaché, yes?”

“Yes. What a small town.”

“Istanbul is a megacity, Michael, but the number of people who have an interest in Wagner, for instance, and regular business with your embassy, is small.”

“Six degrees.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Never mind. Do you remember when you last saw him?”

She thought. “Last summer, perhaps. I think at the consulate’s fourth of July party.”

“How did he seem, to you?”

“He is an American. More American than you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Loud. Friendly. What is the word . . . outgoing.”

I wondered: had Richard made a pass? Was she his type? He and I had shared types before. I said, “This is my last night in Istanbul. I’m flying to Dublin tomorrow morning.”

“And then?”

“In a few days, maybe a week, I’ll catch a plane to San Francisco.”

“It is getting late. Let me drive you to your hotel.”

She drove a two-door Turkish make with a good heater. Snow again fell steadily, now and then whipped by the wind. We spoke little during the drive. The car was a compact and we sat closer than we had at the club. When we arrived I asked her if she’d ever been inside the Pera Palace.

“Only once, as a child. Our school took us, to see the Atatürk room.”

“It’s a bitter night. Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“No thank you. I must prepare for work tomorrow, and you must prepare for your flight. But it was a pleasure meeting you.” She held out her hand, and I took it. “Good luck,” she said, “on your mission.”

“My mission?”

“Finding your friend, Mr. Bergman.”

Walking back into the Pera Palace I heard the sound of laughter coming from the hotel bar. But I made a beeline for the stairs. I didn’t care to trust myself to that “renovated” antique elevator. As I walked up the soft red plush carpeted stairs—everything in that hotel was plush—I felt a pang of loneliness. Çigdem had reminded me, in her appearance, her manner, even in her interest in Wagner (although that had not come off), of Danielle. I half regretted that she had not accepted my invitation. I wondered resignedly how long it would take to get over Richard’s ex-wife.

Tomorrow morning I would fly to Dublin. Within a week I would fly to San Francisco, bypassing New York. Perhaps I would begin to forget Danielle in California, in my search for the lost U.S. Commerce Officer. Jones had made it sound almost like an errand of mercy. Çigdem called it my mission. It was too official and serious a word to have used. But Çigdem struck me as a serious woman.



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PART TWO

California