

CHAPTER 5

The Royal Suite was chilly and dark. Incoming city lights from a bank of windows gave Mark a sense that he was in a well-acquainted space. Drawn by the scenery, Mark approached a window. The Chain Bridge that he had seen earlier still dominated the view, dazzling and luminous, Buda Palace to its left a regal partner. The Danube shimmered with reflections broken by an occasional boat idly drifting by. Mesmerized, Mark momentarily lost his sense of whereabouts and stood motionless, staring.

The room was quiet. It seemed empty. Mark turned his attention inside and noticed that there was no bed. As he walked back toward the door he was startled by a loud, electronic sound, a cellphone ringing. Suddenly the room was illuminated by the flickering light of an iPhone on a coffee table nearby. He instinctively picked it up and looked at the screen. *Iancu*, announced the top of the screen. Mark held the phone against the wall, using the lit screen as a makeshift flashlight, and found a light switch.

He was in a smartly furnished living room, now brightly lit. The chic furniture was in perfect order, as if no one had been here. On the coffee table was a cordless house phone with a business card next to it.

There were no bags or clothes in the room. Where was Ahmet? Could he be downstairs looking for him, while Mark was up here?

“Hello,” he said, loudly. “Ahmet!” No response.

He sat down on the loveseat, facing away from the picture windows, and picked up the house phone, examining its various shortcut buttons for one that might ring the registration desk. The iPhone rang again. Mark had placed it back where it had been. He looked at the screen. *Iancu*! Mark waited for the iPhone to stop ringing before he dialed the house phone.

While waiting for an answer, Mark absentmindedly picked up the business card next to the receiver. It had the Four Seasons insignia on it, with the word Spa in prominent black print. Under it was a name, *Olga Kaminesky, Masseuse*. A few words were listed beneath in Hungarian. Mark presumed they were services offered at the spa. He turned the card over and noticed a phone number scribbled in blue ink. He turned it forward. The spa’s phone number was clearly stated in easily visible print. He looked at the back again. This was a different number.

“Hello, reception desk.” Mark tossed the card back on the table.

The receptionist politely offered to take a look around the lobby if Mark didn’t mind. Mark rubbed his eyebrows and waited with the phone to his ear. With his other hand he reached for the iPhone and pressed its home button. It lit with a series of four missed calls in small print, the two on top from *Iancu*. The other two caught his attention. He picked up the phone and brought it closer to his eyes. Günsu.

Could it be the Günsu he once knew? *No way*, he thought. He tried to check for more information but the phone required a passcode. He set it down and wondered. To his knowledge Günsu lived in Istanbul. He recalled catching up with her at the same high school reunion where he discovered that Ahmet had disappeared. Since no one knew his whereabouts then or subsequently, how could she be contacting Ahmet?

The receptionist returned and interrupted his thoughts. Mr. Radu was not in the lobby area. Yes, the receptionist remembered what he looked like. He had checked him in earlier.

Puzzled, Mark stood up. He turned back to the scene outside, the floodlit highlights of a historic city, calm in darkness. A sense of dread descended on him. Why, he wondered, would Ahmet have him sent to a dark, empty suite? Should he remain here? Was he trespassing? Maybe he should return to the lobby and enlist the help of the sympathetic receptionist. But what could he do? After all, the only way to reach Ahmet, his mobile phone, was lying right here, on the coffee table. Mark was certain that this was indeed Ahmet's phone. Who else would get calls both from a Turkish woman, possibly an old classmate, and an Eastern European name that he presumed was Romanian?

Mark looked about the empty suite. This was not what he had flown all the way to Budapest for. He decided to give the place a complete look-over before returning to the lobby.

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Mark crossed a dining area and entered a capacious bedroom. He quickly found a light switch. A king-size bed to his right dominated the room, with a luxuriously shiny, dark headboard rising regally along the wall. Beyond the bed was an arrangement of tall bay windows jutting out of the room, framed by the main façade wall as though the windows were a stage. An armchair and coffee table were tucked near the windows affording a convenient view of the Danube. The curtains were open. Mark ignored the now familiar outside view and looked around.

This room appeared more lived in. At the foot of the bed was a stylish black leather bench with a pile of small pillows on one side and a small carry-on bag in the middle, unzipped but closed. On the other side of the room another armchair was littered with casually tossed clothes, pants that had almost slid to the floor, a long-sleeved shirt, all wrinkled, socks on the armrest, white briefs on top of the pants. A pair of shoes lay near the opposite wall, as if they had been kicked out directly from the feet. Mark recognized his old friend's modus operandi. Ahmet's childhood room in Şişli had been a bigger mess than this. Raised with a spick-and-span upbringing, Mark had always been fascinated with Ahmet's mess and the way his parents allowed it.

The bed was well made, the cover unwrinkled. The nightstand by the bay windows was empty. The other, closer to the entrance, had a wrist watch, a few foreign bills and some coins. Mark did not touch them.

To the right of the nightstand was a round, dial-up thermostat. It clashed with the generally modern décor of the suite. As Mark stared at it, something glistened on the carpet below. He knelt down and picked up a pair of round, wire-rimmed spectacles, realizing as he did, that the right side of the pair was cracked. He also noticed that his fingers were wet. He examined the carpet more closely. There was a prominent wet spot where the spectacles lay.

The glasses were familiar. Mark knew that Ahmet would be nearly blind without them. Where could he be?

He laid the glasses on the nightstand and smelled his wet fingertips. An unmistakable aroma of ammonia filled his nostrils. Urine. His sense of dread resumed, now with more fervor.

There was only one area left to explore. A luxurious suite such as this had to have an opulent bathroom to match. Mark looked at the other side of the entrance, at an open door with darkness beyond. He walked over to it and felt the wall for a light switch.

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It was indeed an impressive bathroom, spacious, with a walk-in-shower lined in white Carrara marble, and two side-by-side sinks with wide mirrors and towels neatly arrayed nearby. It looked sparsely used except for some toiletries on one of the sinks. Mark noticed two flip-flop sandals near the entrance, askew and far from each other.

Then he saw Ahmet.

His old mate was sprawled in the cavernous bathtub, his back upright against the side, his eyes closed as if he had fallen asleep there. It was a white, square tub, equipped with whirlpool outlets. There was no water in it. Ahmet wore one of the hotel's lush bath gowns, open in the front, revealing a lean, athletic body, still youthful for his age. His right leg was spread out, bent at the knee, his left leg straight. The back of his gown behind his open legs was prominently stained by a colorless wet spot. It looked like he had passed out in the tub.

At the top edge of the bathtub, near Ahmet's slumping head, were two passports. One was upright and had been bent backwards so it would remain open. It was burgundy colored, had an impressive coat of arms on its front cover with the words *Uniunea Europeană România* emblazoned atop. It looked brand new and was open to the identification page featuring a mature photo of Ahmet. He had gone bald and looked like his father, Latif. The name in it was Nicolae Radu. To its left was the other passport, unopened. It was a Bordeaux-brown Turkish passport with a gold crescent and star on its cover. It looked well worn.

Mark stared at the passports and wondered why Ahmet would bring them to the bathtub. He reached for the Turkish one and just before touching it, thought better and stopped. He turned his attention back to his old friend lying in the bathtub.

Mark now realized that Ahmet was not breathing. His face was dusky, his cheeks bruised in thin lines that ran from his nose to the edges of his lips. There were strange parallel lines on his upper arms and bare chest, down to the belly button. He reached over and took Ahmet's left wrist, searching for a pulse. There was a thin, circular bruise on it, like a bracelet. As Mark lifted the wrist, Ahmet's elbow and shoulder easily gave way. His body was not stiff. Mark couldn't find a pulse. He then searched for a carotid pulse, his eyes on the strange passports behind Ahmet's head. Once again, no pulse.

Puzzled, he stood over the bath looking his friend over. Did he have a heart attack? Some drug overdose? His right wrist also had a bracelet-like bruise. What were these? Mark noticed the same parallel lines as on his torso along Ahmet's legs, extending from mid-thigh to ankles. He had no idea what these were.

Did Ahmet fall into the bathtub drunk? But there was no disorder in the bathroom that a drunk person might produce, nor was there any blood anywhere.

The doctor in him momentarily took over, his perplexity suppressing his shock over the calamity he had walked in on. He knelt again and opened Ahmet's left eyelid. The pupil was dilated and the white

of his eye, his sclera, was full of petechiae, tiny spots of blood. He quickly inspected the right eye and found the same. There was no doubt.

He stood up and quickly exited the bathroom, leaving the lights on. He needed to notify the police, but he had no idea how to do that. He returned to the living room of the suite, to the same spot that he had occupied minutes ago on the loveseat. He sank his face into his palms and, head bent down, reflected on what he had just witnessed. His old friend, his best friend from his teenage years, was dead. Images of a lively young Ahmet, mischievous, charming, all smiles, filled his mind. He let out a muffled sob, then collected himself and picked up the cordless house phone.

As Mark waited through two rings, the business card from the spa caught his attention again. He picked it up and held it in his free hand while he calmly described his dreadful discovery to an increasingly alarmed receptionist, asking that police be summoned. He then sat back and waited for hotel staff to arrive, the business card still in his hand. It appeared to him that Ahmet may have visited the spa this same evening. If so, this Olga, a masseuse according to the card, would have been the last person to see him. Why had she given him this card with a phone number jotted on the back?

Mark knew Ahmet's allure with women. He needed to find this woman and talk to her about what Ahmet had been like. She would be the only one who could describe to him that which he had flown all this way to seek. Mark pocketed the card.