

CHAPTER 3

Friday, February 12, 1999

Derinkuyu, Cappadocia, Turkey

Inspector Ahmen Faraz exited the workers' locker room as another Fantasy Tour bus belched clouds of diesel fumes into the parking lot. Pink-skinned tourists emerged into the bright spring sun of central Turkey. A chorus of giggles erupted from a gathering of teenagers staring upward. Outlined against the pale sky was a field of sixty-foot fairy chimneys each one resembling a giant phallus.

Faraz shook his head in disgust and checked his watch. Eight minutes until his shift began. He leaned against the building, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The tourists gathered in a tight circle around a multi-lingual guide who tried to explain the word *troglo-dyte*. These foreign idiots were anxious to view the place where an entire civilization had once thrived underground. If they, like he, had to spend half their lives trying to earn a living in those excavations, they wouldn't be so damned eager.

Faraz watched the tour guide, a tall, mustached Turk whose white shirt had yellowed under the arms, lead his wide-eyed contingent to the yawning black hole that was the entrance to the ancient city of Melgobia. He cupped his mouth like a bullhorn, and in perfect English continued his spiel over the distant rumble of the bus's engine.

More than twenty-five hundred years ago, the first handful of dirt had been excavated by the original occupants. During the centuries that followed, the hole-dwellers had dug ten kilometers of narrow passageways and twelve hundred rooms capable of housing ten thousand people. The Turkish Government had opened the first level in 1964 and soon discovered the attraction to be a lucrative source of tourist income. An unexpected bonus came from the trove of artifacts buried under the tons of rubble in the caverns. Three crews worked around the clock, six days each week, clearing levels seven and eight. The flood of foreign currency generated by hordes of future visitors was expected to stem the inflationary spiral of the Turkish lire.

The passageways, dimly lit and similar in appearance, made it easy for even those familiar with the labyrinth to become disoriented. To avoid that potential, the tourists were lined up and told to hold onto a common rope during their time underground.

Faraz glanced at his watch, threw his cigarette to the ground and passed the line of brightly-dressed, chattering tourists. He stopped at a fenced area posted WORKMEN ONLY, flashed his badge to a guard armed with a Kalashnikov, and was waved through.

To the left of Faraz, a dozen dirt-covered workmen, who had finished a ten-hour shift in

the lower levels, stacked their hard hats by the exit. They shuffled their feet impatiently while a second guard swept each one with a metal detector, then patted him down.

Shielded from the eyes of tourists by a tarp, a man wearing a white smock stood beside a table. As they reached this table, each worker dropped his pants and leaned over. A sign stapled to the canvas warned that the minimum punishment for removing artifacts from Turkish historical sites was twenty years in prison. Behind each worker, a rubber glove snapped and a finger prodded. The workers sighed with resignation, lifted their pants, retrieved their hard hats, and with hand-shaded eyes, entered the world of sunlight. Faraz grimaced at the thought of the rubber-gloved man.

Gold and silver artifacts from the dig were plentiful and extremely valuable on the black market. Precious gems, not susceptible to discovery by a metal detector, had previously been hidden in the orifices of bodies. No one knew the number of jewels swallowed, thus escaping the eye and the finger. Still, no worker left the underground city without the sweep, pat and prod.

Faraz's turn on the table would come at the end of his shift. He sidled around a hairpin curve and wound his way downward toward the excavation zone. At level five he passed the artifact storeroom. A guard leaned against the stone wall and stroked the hole in the trigger guard of his automatic rifle while staring brazenly at light-skinned tourist girls gathered before a display of earthenware.

Below the tourist area, Faraz stooped to avoid striking his head on a low archway, ducked under a chain barrier with a sign that read: DANGER! RESTRICTED AREA-AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, and proceeded down another set of steps.

At the seventh level, he stood for a long moment adjusting to air so laden with dust that workmen appeared as apparitions. Low wattage bulbs, strung at miserly distances, required the use of a headlamp to avoid colliding with others. Sounds of workmen chopping and scraping in the narrow tunnels were magnified.

Faraz unfastened an oxygen sensor clipped to his belt, shined his helmet light on the meter and pressed the button. The needle wobbled below the safe range, and a red light winked. Struggling with the worn strap of his oxygen mask, he cursed fate and Allah for assigning him to work underground like a mole and the accompanying humiliation suffered at the end of each work day.

If the corrupt Bureau of Mines would earmark a small fraction of the tourist income produced from these burrows, they could install ventilating fans powerful enough to infuse fresh air in and suck the rock dust out. But no, they would rather endanger the lives of them all.

In the Turkish job market, Faraz's degree in mining and engineering from the University of Ankara was a worthless piece of donkey dung. The salary of a senior inspector was equivalent to forty U. S. dollars, and paid in Turkish lire, which was shrinking daily. Faraz's career was going nowhere. Nepotism and graft insured the failure of everyone except relatives of the administrators and those with means to purchase a position. The memory of being denied a visa to travel to London gave him heartburn. A man of his brilliance, imprisoned in his own country, condemned to a life of mediocrity with less pay than those who cleaned the *tuvalet*.

Mumbling, Faraz continued along the tunnel walls passing entrances to rooms being cleared, each one identified by a number sprayed on plywood. He came to a bottleneck where several workmen gathered outside a small cell labeled H-766, the interior of which was no larger than the inside of his fifteen-year-old Volkswagen minivan.

“What’s the problem here?” Faraz asked.

One of the men pointed toward the dark chamber. “We were waiting for you. The superintendent said to stay clear of this compartment until you certify it safe.”

Rubble on the floor from previous cave-ins forced Faraz to bend at the waist to avoid striking his head. He advanced cautiously into the gloom, gently tapping the walls and ceiling with an awl, listening for hollow responses. From his belt he removed an auger designed to take core samples.

Without so much as a tremor of warning, a thick segment of sandstone crashed down from the ceiling, stripping Faraz’s helmet and mask and crushing him to the floor. The concussion filled the chamber and passageway with particles of dust and rock. Shouts of alarm went up.

“Get out!” Faraz ordered.

A hand touched his shoulder. “I’ll help you, inspector.”

“My legs are buried,” he said, choking. “Hurry!”

The man clawed at the stone, throwing large slabs of shale aside. The inspector was almost free when another small section broke loose overhead and rained more debris on Faraz’s legs.

Faraz shouted, “Save yourself before this whole damn passageway collapses.”

The man scrambled to the tunnel stairs. In seconds his sounds disappeared, and the seventh level became silent save for the hack of Faraz’s cough. Falling rock had severed the power line, leaving the burrow a tomb of darkness.

Alone and sightless, the inspector regretted his heroism. Filling his lungs, he prepared to scream for help, but the sound strangled in his throat. Sound waves often caused excavations to collapse. He twisted his upper torso and feverishly scooped handfuls of shale away, then lifted the remaining slabs from his legs. Drenched with sweat, he sat for a moment feeling his upper legs and knees, wiggling his toes. Nothing broken. Another fit of coughing took him. He muffled the sound with both hands. When the urge passed, he tore a strip from his shirttail, covered his mouth and nose, and tied it behind his head.

A quick prayer. If Allah would let him escape, he would be generous in his giving to the mosque.

From several levels above came the faint wail of the evacuation siren. Using the wall as a guide, he inched on his stomach toward the entrance. He blinked. A tiny beam of light projected upward out of the rubble. His heart leaped. He sat up, shifted several thin slabs of granite, and uttered another prayer as he pulled his helmet free and with his fingers felt its surface. A U-shaped crater decorated the steel headpiece. He shuddered, visualizing the effects of such a blow to his bare head.

He shook the dirt from the headgear, put it on, and tightened the strap. The light beam sliced through the thick haze. Protruding from the wall, an arm's length from his face, was the lip of a small urn. He edged closer. Cooking and drinking utensils of the cave dwellers were usually found buried under rubble on the floors, not in the walls. His stomach knotted. Here might be something of value—coins, or better yet jewels. Not all ancient residents of the underground city had been paupers.

With his awl, he loosened the remaining clay and eased the slender vessel from its vault. He fought the urge to cough and glanced at the tons of rock hanging above. A wild fluttering took his chest. He must hurry! He took the helmet off, and using it as a receptacle turned the urn upside down and shook it. He removed the head lamp and focused its beam inside. Nothing. He probed. The opening was clogged. He jabbed at the obstruction with the awl, broke through, and again turned the container upside down. Dirt and clay rained into his helmet. All he had discovered was a wine bottle, a perfect specimen and undoubtedly of value, but he had no hope of making it past the inspection station with the piece.

For a fleeting moment he had dreamed of somehow smuggling jewels out of this cursed cave. He had been unable to steal anything from the caverns since the Bureau of Mines installed the damned security system. Disgusted, and without thinking, he threw the urn against the wall. Shards of pottery peppered the floor. A thin roll of parchment fell at his knees.

Startled, Faraz sat staring. The object was no greater in circumference than a large cigar, its exterior dark brown and laced with cracks. He leaned forward and gingerly picked it up. It was covered with a thick waxy substance. He thumped it with his forefinger—hollow. He shook it next to his ear. No sound. Suddenly he felt dizzy and remembered he no longer wore his face mask.

Shouts of a rescue team echoed from the level above. The fools were going to make enough noise to bring another deluge on his head. He put the helmet back on. In a matter of seconds, the men would reach him.

Sweating and gasping for breath, he pulled up the leg of his trousers, and stuck the leathery roll into his tube sock on the inside of his leg. A choking laugh caught in his throat. He would try to smuggle this roll of rotten leather—probably worthless—from this coffin at the risk of spending twenty years in prison. But the thing might have some value. He pulled his pant leg down, and with dirt and rock covered the shards of the crock.

Minutes later, supported by two workmen, the dirt-covered Faraz, his heart pounding like a dervish drum, stumbled into the sunlight and through the metal detector. The soldier waved him past the pat down and away from the long-fingered man in the white coat.

Outside, Husum, his hawk-eyed superintendent, met him. Faraz, partially in response to lungs filled with dirt and silicone, but also with an abundance of theatrics, doubled over and coughed with such violence the super insisted he go to the hospital.

The parking lot was full of tourists who had been hustled out of the caves. They clapped and cheered for Ahmen Faraz whose unselfish act of sending his fellow workers to the surface had already been circulated and embellished. While being escorted to a waiting ambulance he

nodded to acknowledge the momentary fame, but only after the double doors of the vehicle closed behind him did he take a full breath.

In the emergency room of the local hospital, the inspector's cough rapidly improved. And no, he told the emergency room doctor, he would not spend the night in the hospital for observation, and no, he would not remove his boots so his feet could be examined. They were fine.

As he rode along the dusty streets of Derinkuyu in an ancient taxi, he rubbed the side of his leg and sighed. He was losing his mind. Only an idiot would have taken such a gamble.