

## CHAPTER 1

The cool wind that blew across the tarmac caught Matt Quillan off-guard as he negotiated the steps down from the plane. The shock of that early-morning breeze on his face was punctuated by a solitary drop of rain that hit him in the eye. He had not expected Istanbul to be so cold and damp in the dying days of September.

Picking up his bags from the carousel some thirty minutes later, he headed outside for the buses. It was not a fear of flying with the local airline that prompted him to shun the transfer desk for domestic flights. He needed time to get his head around what he was doing on this southeasternmost fringe of Europe. For Matt, it had the hallmarks of a country moving into the fast lane to tyranny.

He really had no wish to be here. But a long-distance bus ride to the south coast of Turkey would at least delay his arrival by the best part of a day and give him time to think.

Walking out into the chill of the morning air to get the bus, he could not escape the presence of heavily armed guards. They lurked on every corner. At every exit. And did nothing to ease Matt's apprehension. Or to allay his doubts about ever agreeing to come here in the first place.

His sense of foreboding was not diminished by what was about to follow.

He had agreed to locate a person of interest for his old friend Ben Braithwaite. Matt was no sleuth and had no idea what awaited him or what his first move should be. Ben had suggested only that he start the search in a resort on the Mediterranean coast. As to why he was even looking for the person, he had remained stubbornly evasive.

Matt felt forever indebted to his old friend for funding his start-up in the security business. Without this help, he would likely still be battling his demons of alcohol, cocaine and poker tables. Or at best floundering on a zero-hours contract somewhere.

So, when Ben called in the debt one day, Matt knew he had no other option. It was a good six weeks ago when, out of the blue, Ben called to say he was in town and why didn't they meet for a drink. They had not seen each other for a good seven or eight years. It proved to be a drinking date he would never forget.

"This has nothing to do with company business, Matt. So, I'll be paying you out of my own pocket, but you'll be rewarded handsomely," he said, before lifting the empty glass again.

"Another one?"

Matt nodded and mulled the prospect of financial compensation. With a divorce to deal with in the months ahead, the extra money was not to be sniffed at.

"So, just supposing I go along with this," he said, when Ben returned from the bar with two more glasses of beer, "who am I looking for?"

"The man's called Ahmet. Ahmet Karadeniz. He was last known to be in or around a tourist resort on the south coast of Turkey called Karakent. Runs a property business, so he should be quite easy to find."

"If he's so easy to find, why don't you go and look for him yourself?" Matt asked.

"I'll be sailing down that way in October. I'm hoping you'll have found him by then," Ben said.

This was no explanation. And it was his friend's evasiveness that nagged at Matt's thoughts now as the bus headed over the Bosphorus and into Anatolia.

While he pondered every angle of Ben's motives and of what might lie ahead for him, both here in Turkey and back home in London with the pending divorce, the flicker of passing trees cast his thoughts adrift. His eyes closed, and he fell into a deep sleep.

It was the harsh sound of a jangling ringtone that rocked him from his slumber. On the opposite side of the aisle, the only other passenger still remaining – a young man in his late twenties perhaps – gazed out of the window. He spoke a few muffled words into his phone. Then slid the device furtively back into his pocket, peering over the seats in front as he did so, and glanced across the aisle towards Matt. Only a fleeting glance. But it was enough to give Matt a sense of being measured up.

The young man turned his gaze back to the road ahead. He appeared nervous. The bus was beginning to slow down. He picked up a laptop bag that lay at his feet, unzipped it and, slipping his hand quickly in and out of the bag, crossed the aisle and parked himself in the seat beside Matt.

"My name Rekan," he said, extending a hand.

Matt was taken aback by this unwanted advance, but did his best to remain unfazed by the intrusion.

"Matt," he said in return and took Rekan's hand.

"You go to Karakent," the young man said, making an imperative of what Matt took to be a question. Matt assumed it was his reddish-blond hair that prompted the young man's use of English, since he could not by any stretch of the imagination be taken for a Turk.

"Yes," Matt replied, unable to conceal the suspicion in his voice.

"Please, go to Trabzon Ekmek Fırını and ask for Murat," Rekan said, pressing something into Matt's hand. "Give him this."

Matt looked at the object. It was a USB stick. His suspicion hardened.

“Where?”

“Trabzon Ekmek Fırını,” he repeated, hastily pulling pen and paper from his pocket, writing out the words in bold capitals and thrusting the paper into Matt’s hand.

“Why don’t you give it to him yourself?”

“I must go,” he said. Then, as the bus eventually ground to a halt and the engine stopped, he implored Matt again with a “please” as he slipped back across the aisle to his seat, adding in a whisper, “Give it to Murat. Only Murat.”

At that moment, the door of the bus slid open and two uniformed men in berets climbed on board. One of them exchanged some words with the driver, while the other surveyed the rows of seats ahead of him before slowly making his way up the aisle to the back of the bus. He inspected each row of seats as he went, then turned and made his way back towards the only two passengers on the bus.

The gendarme stopped just behind the row where Matt and the mysterious Rekan were sitting. He muttered a few words in Turkish that Matt was unable to understand. The young man fished a document out of his pocket and handed it to the gendarme, who inspected it briefly as he gestured towards the door. Rekan rose from his seat, picking up his laptop bag, and made his way down the aisle towards the door.

“Pasaport,” said the gendarme, turning to Matt with a complete lack of expression in either his voice or his face. Matt presented his passport. The gendarme took it – with a long, piercing gaze at Matt as he did so – and slowly leafed through every page. He meticulously studied every visa and every stamp that Matt had accumulated in the last five or six years since he last renewed his passport. Still leafing through the document, he strolled back down the length of the bus, turning as he reached the door, and beckoned Matt to follow.

Matt had enough experience of the Jandarma from his very first trip to Turkey as a student to know that they are not to be

messed with. He had almost been landed with a long jail term over a vestigial gram of cannabis found in his pocket. Fortunately, they had proved more inclined to bribery than they were to upholding the law. But this was a character trait he could not count on now with the country's new taste for cracking down on freedoms of any kind and incarcerating anyone it takes a dislike to. So, he tamely followed.

When he emerged from the bus, he saw the gendarme disappear into a van. Its red and blue flashing lights cast an eerily pulsating hue over the early evening sky around the bus. Rekan was already seated in the back of the van. Matt was left to wait and contemplate what lay ahead of him in the chill of the mountain air that bristled through the cedar trees. He walked a few metres off the road to escape the reach of the van's pulsating lights, lit a cigarette and watched the white mountain in the distance gradually absorb the growing redness of the sky.

There was a portentous quality about this mountain. The way it would not let go: it had tracked his journey south for the best part of half an hour. As if it carried a message and would not give way until it was delivered.

The sound of the van door sliding open butted rudely into his stream of thought. He flinched and turned to see the gendarme approaching.

"Where you go?" he asked Matt.

"Karakent."

"Otel?"

"Kelebek," Matt replied. Ben had recommended he stay there.

"Good," was all the gendarme said in reply. He returned Matt's passport and walked back to the van. Rekan remained inside. Matt climbed back onto the bus, where he was now completely alone, apart from the driver, who had sat impassively in his seat throughout. As Matt relaxed back into his seat, the only sign that the driver was there at all was the sound of the engine starting up and the motion of the bus as it continued on its journey.

Matt had a sense of being cast adrift in a huge puzzle, none of whose pieces fitted. He had set out on this journey as a favour, although Ben had never made clear to him exactly what it was all about and left him no idea where it would lead. And now, acutely aware of the lump in his pocket that was Rekan's flash drive, he had the distinct feeling he had just been thrown another huge piece in a completely different puzzle that had nothing to do with him.

When the bus emerged from the mountain landscape and lumbered now along a winding coast road, his mind wandered out across the vast expanse of sea to his left. The turquoise of the water had already turned a dark blue, as the peninsula jutting into the sea ahead swallowed up the crimson sun. Only another twenty kilometres to go if the road sign they had just passed was to be believed. But Karakent itself would prove not to be quite the tourist resort he had imagined it to be.