

 PROLOGUE  
ÆSIA MINOR  
FIRST CENTURY OF THE  
COMMON ERÆ

At first light, the old man poured water from the amphora into the earthenware bowl. He slid his hands into the water, leaned over, and splashed sleep from his face. He then combed his fingers through his sparse hair and white beard, shook his hands above the bowl, and stepped from his stone hut into the morning. Though he limped, his gait was quick and deliberate as he followed a path uphill to the edge of a bluff. He stopped in an oval clearing, facing west toward the land and sea that were still dark. He knelt for a few moments in the matted grass and then moved to a low flat stone, where he sat with his legs crossed and his hands folded. His prayer was silent, pure homage to the Creator and His creation. The sun rose behind him, bathing him in light. The pain and stiffness seeped from his bones as he prayed.

When the land glowed and the distant city and harbor shone, he rose, stretched, and returned to his hut. He took a scroll that he had stowed between his mat and the wall and went back into the light. After unrolling the scroll, he reread his words. His hand, though contorted with age, had been constant enough that his lettering was neat. Given all that he had seen and done in his life, he had said finally what he needed to say—perhaps not eloquently, but in a way, he hoped, that others would understand.

He did not take the scroll back into the hut. This was, he knew, the morning, and his testament must outlive him. He walked back toward the bluff and then veered from the path into a stand of pines

and scabbled up through the scent and shade. When he tripped on a root, he grabbed a low branch to catch himself. By the time he reached the glade dappled with light, he was breathing hard. He fell to his knees at the mouth of a small hollow, laid the scroll at his side, brushed away the pine needles, and dug down through the dirt with his fingers until he reached the stone box that only he knew still existed. She had known, of course, but he had held the truth alone now for years.

He pried the box open and shifted the lid. As he gazed into the box, he began to tremble. Slow tremors ran from his shoulders. He had mourned and exalted hundreds of times before, and this was the last. Tears ran down his face, his shuddering quickened, and the pine-scented air filled his chest. Kneeling there, he took an older scroll from the box. His hands shook as he unraveled the document. Just as they had so many years before, the words rang him like a bell. His shuddering at first deepened and then slackened and finally ceased. His breathing slowed. Finally, his hands steady again, he slipped the document back into the box. He stared for a time at the bones she herself had placed there, but he did not touch any of them. He then lifted the scroll he had recently written and placed it in the box as well. His own words lay with the others—safe, he hoped, for a time.

He shut the box's lid, made sure it was tight, and passed his hand over the symbols and inscription. He continued to recall all that had happened until, when he heard voices in the distance, he buried the box with loose soil and pine needles. He crawled backward away from the hollow, brushing the dirt to cover his tracks, and then rested his hands on his knees and bowed his head. For a few moments, his world was pine, birdsong, and bright pools of light.

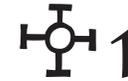
The old man made his way back to the path and the flat stone on the bluff. He sat facing west, breathing the beauty of the world, waiting for those who were coming. Although he did not welcome this moment, he was not frightened. He gazed past the city and harbor to the sea, a bright sash that bound heaven to earth. A rabbit crossed the clearing, butterflies fluttered above the grass, and gnats rose into the light. The voices were already near. The mob, which must have

started from the city before dawn, was almost upon him. The distant sea sparked and flamed in the sunshine.

He rose slowly and turned to face the rabble. The sun blinded him for a second, but as he squinted he recognized the leaders, bearded men with flowing robes and clubs and whips, men he had known well, men with whom he had broken bread and prayed. Pharisees and Elders and Scribes. The younger men and boys who followed held stones in their hands. Three fat crones trailed behind.

He lifted his arms, his hands forward, palms out and fingers down. The horde halted a short distance from him. He looked each of the leaders in the eye, offering forgiveness he knew they could not accept. When the High Priest, a tall man with sharp features and thick lips, raised his whip, their eyes locked—a fleeting balance between love and hate, forgiveness and vengeance, life and death.

The High Priest's lips curled into a sneer. The whip cracked in the air. A guttural roar rose from the pack. The first stone struck the old man's chest, taking his breath and knocking him back almost to the edge of the bluff. He stayed standing even when the next stone shattered his nose. The first lash cut across his face and shoulder. His knees buckled, and he wobbled forward. A strand of spider webbing glowed in the grass. The pines swirled, and the sky quaked. The world reeled and faded through the flailing, the beating, and the tearing.



As the Boeing 737 shreds the clouds, the tankers and cargo ships spread out below on the Sea of Marmara. When the plane banks and turns, Joseph Travers peers down at Istanbul's red roofs and myriad minarets pointed like rockets ready to launch. A helicopter wheels above the terminal as the 737 approaches Atatürk International Airport. A lone black bird beats low across the scrub grass between the runways. War is simmering again in the Middle East—as it has been more often than not for thousands of years. But Travers' mission, he believes, is more mediatory than martial. Travers has come to Istanbul the day before his meetings partly to get a feel for the place and partly because there's not much to hold him in Chicago. On the flights over, he skimmed guidebooks about Turkey, particularly Istanbul, but this is his first visit to this part of the world—and he has only an outsider's understanding of the culture. As he passes through the terminal, a woman's voice on the loudspeaker seems to be repeating, "Buy bullets... Buy bullets..." He knows only a few Turkish phrases—*merhaba, lütfen*, and *teşekkür ederim*—"hello" and "please" and "thank you."

The taxi's route into the old city takes Travers along Kennedy Caddesi. The Byzantine wall, which withstood sieges for over a thousand years, rises on his left. On his right, the Sea of Marmara sparks in the late afternoon sunlight. In the narrow strip of park and break-wall between the road and water, men saunter in small groups and families picnic in the intermittent trees' scant shade. The majority of women are veiled, and none strolls alone—but the boys and girls run about playing like children anywhere.

When he checks into the Blue House Hotel, the clerk, a beautiful woman who looks like a young Audrey Hepburn, hands him a handwritten message that reads:

*Joseph Travers, it is necessary that we meet today.*

*Contact me at 547 14 53.*

*Sophia Altay*

Sophia Altay is Travers' reason for coming to Turkey, and he stares at the note as he rides with the bellhop in the narrow elevator. The penmanship is precise but with a flare for serifs. He tips the bellhop and gazes out his room's window at the Blue Mosque's domes and minarets. Neither Altay nor anyone else involved in the Ephesus Project knows he was coming in a day early. His initial meeting is scheduled for seven the next evening at the Pera Palas Hotel. And, though his mission matters to the future funding of her archeological dig, the insistence, even urgency, in Altay's note seems strange. He looks over at the painted ceramic tile hanging on the back of the room's door. Designed to protect against the evil eye, the nazar boncuğu has a black center with concentric outer circles of light blue, white, and dark blue.

He unpacks and washes his face before making the call. A woman's voice with a slight French accent answers on the first ring.

"Sophia Altay?" he asks as he sits down on the bed facing the window.

"Joseph Travers?" Her accent gives his name a subtle lilt.

"Joe," he says, gazing again at the minarets.

"We need to meet this evening, Joseph." Her tone is cool, if not exactly cold, and her statement sounds more like a fact than an idea. Apparently they aren't going to exchange pleasantries about his trip.

"Okay, Ms. Altay," he says. "How about dinner?"

"Yes. The terrace restaurant at your hotel. At twenty-thirty. Eight-thirty. That will give you time to get settled."

His phone, which reset to Istanbul time as the 737 landed, says 5:40. He left O'Hare the afternoon before and had only a ninety-minute lay-over at Heathrow, but he caught a couple of naps in flight and doesn't feel jet-lagged. "Sure," he says. "Good. Will anybody else be there?"

"No, Joseph," she answers. "Just the two of us." There's nothing romantic in her voice.

"Okay. Wear a gardenia in your hair so I recognize you."

"I will know who you are," she says before hanging up.

His breath catches as he listens to the dial tone, that particular sound once again striking him with loss and separation. The Blue Mosque's six minarets, barbed arrows, pierce the sky. His chest hollows,

a void that spreads until his ribs feel as though they will blanch and crumble. He turns the phone off, wipes his mouth with his hand, inhales deeply, stands, and crosses to the window.



The sky is cobalt, but the sun is already low—and little light reaches the trench in which the two men work. The evening air is hot and still as though it has hung there for centuries. Sweat soaks the stout man's sleeveless t-shirt and mats the gray and white hair on his arms and shoulders. His nose is bulbous above his mustache, the top of his head bald except for long strands of hair hanging limply over his left ear. He grunts as he pushes dirt aside with his trowel. The taller, younger man is more careful, but he, too, breathes hard as he whisks dirt with his brush. The discovery, far more than the exertion, is taking his breath. He is clean-shaven; his features are fine, his black hair thick. Neither man speaks until they have completely uncovered the ancient ossuary, the bone box.

When the stout man stands, his head is still well below the trench line. He stabs the trowel into a pile of dirt, wipes his grimy hands on his pants, pulls up the front of his shirt, and smears the sweat from his face. He picks up an empty plastic water bottle, glares at it, and tosses it next to the trowel. The younger man sets his hands on his hips, catches his breath, and stares at the ossuary. The bone box, a meter long and seventy centimeters wide, seems to glow even in the trench's shadows. Although he can't read the words etched into the stone, he recognizes them as Aramaic. The symbols—the equal-armed cross within the circle within the six-pointed star—are familiar, but their juxtaposition is not.

As the call to prayer begins, a cirrus horsetail swirls through the

rectangle of sky. The voice barely carries into the trench, but the two men turn and stand still. The heavy man murmurs prayers, and the thin one bows his head in silence, his prayer of a different sort. A prayer of both gratitude and supplication. A prayer that this ossuary is what he yearns for it to be. The cloud's wispy tail snaps clear.

When the echo of prayer ceases, the stout man squats and digs his fingers under the corners of the bone box.

"Wait!" the young man says in Turkish. "She should be here. We *must* wait for her."

Glowering across the box, the stout man grabs the hand-pick he used earlier.

"No!" The young man stoops and presses his palms on the ossuary's lid. "She must open it." His face reddens, and his fingers burn as though the ossuary is too sacred, too hallowed, too inviolable, to be touched by humans.

The stout man swings the pick across the young man's knuckles.

The young man leaps back, his eyes wide. His mouth opens, but words don't form. Blood beads on the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

The stout man leans over and jams the pick's tip under the rim of the ossuary's lid. As he pushes the handle with both hands, getting his weight into it, the lid creaks open. Keeping the pick in place as a wedge, he kneels and runs his stubby fingers under the lid. Stale air rises as he lifts the lid, holds it to his sweating chest, and stares into the box.

Despite himself, despite his stinging fingers and welling tears, the young man steps forward and peers into the box. Making the sign of the cross repeatedly, he takes a series of deep breaths in an unsuccessful attempt to calm himself. Blood trickles down his hand and drops, bright splotches darkening into sandy soil. Blinding sacrosanct light rises from the ossuary, weaving around them and spiraling from the trench. He glances at the stout man who is unable to see the light, runs his hand through his hair, and gazes back into the box. He cannot draw his eyes from the contents, though his pupils might at any second be seared and his skin peel away. The moment is every bit as

frightening as it is exhilarating. His blood boils—the Janissary blood, the blood of his lost ancestors, the wanderers and cave dwellers alike. There is much more to this even than he imagined, much more to it than she will at first believe.



Needing to walk before meeting with Sophia Altay, Joseph Travers leaves his room key at the front desk and heads out into Istanbul's early evening. Over the three years since Jason's death, long walks have become necessary for him, as essential as breathing. He went out at all times, light and dark, and in all weather, external and internal. He walked sometimes for hours until, at least for a few moments, he trekked beyond the void. And often those walks were the only thing that allowed his head to clear and his thoughts to settle.

A skinny young man, probably in his late teens, attaches himself to Travers before he crosses the street. The boy falls into step, says hello, and asks in passable English where he's going.

Travers doesn't think *walking through sadness* would work as an answer so he says, "The Blue Mosque."

"I will show you the way," the boy says, pointing along the Cavalry Bazaar.

Shaking his head, Travers says, "Thanks anyway, but it's not really necessary."

"It's no problem," the boy answers without missing a step. His smile is wide, his teeth crooked.

The bazaar's carpet and handicraft shops encroach on the mosque's property, and Travers has a fleeting thought that someone with a stronger sense of the sacred might well wind cord into whip. While they climb the steps and cross to the mosque's visitors' entrance, the

boy asks where in America Travers is from. When he tells him, the boy says that his brother visited Chicago and that his cousin lives in LA. As an older man with packets of postcards approaches, the boy snarls something in Turkish that must mean, “Get away from my goddamned pigeon.” After reminding Travers to remove his shoes and carry them in one of the plastic bags provided, he mentions that his family owns a carpet shop at the other end of the bazaar and that he’ll be waiting for Travers at the mosque’s exit.

Travers wasn’t really able to focus on the mosque’s exterior while he was being steered toward the entrance, but the interior takes his breath. It’s enormous—and empty, with no pews and no altar. Small lights, fastened to circular bars hanging from hundreds of wires, illuminate the elaborate blue tilework. Men prostrate themselves on the prayer rugs facing the ornate mihrab, which marks the direction of Mecca. The minbar, a high elegant pulpit used by the imam to preach, stands to the right of the mihrab. Half a dozen children run about on the carpets in the vast space under the central dome. Women pray in an isolated niche on the periphery. They all have their heads covered, something that reminds Travers of the uniformed girls kneeling in Prescott’s Saint Joseph’s Academy chapel when he was very young. His mother was the school nurse, and she would sometimes bring him with her to work when he was himself too young for school. He liked her small white office with its neat stacks of medical supplies. And, as he sat in the back of the chapel with his mother at the weekly masses, the girls’ high voices ascended in song, their Latin chants rising through the soft, stained-glass light and sweet candle scent.

Now, he stands on the periphery as well. He hasn’t prayed in recent years, hasn’t really been able to, but the mosque seems a good spot for it. He leans against a pillar for twenty minutes, waiting, but no chant wells up through the emptiness. Incapable of even an Our Father or a Hail Mary, he’s struck instead by how isolated he feels. He hasn’t yet seen another American, mostly because after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan many of his countrymen aren’t traveling to any Islamic nation, even a secular one. And Turkey’s role as America’s ally is becoming increasingly ambiguous as the anti-Americanism in

the region becomes more rabid. A young man is lurking outside the mosque’s exit and a woman is meeting him for dinner, but he still feels ostracized by language and religion and culture.

Before Travers has time to tie the laces on his walking shoes, the skinny boy is on him again. Travers sits on a ledge in the mosque’s courtyard, looks over at the ablutions fountain, and tells the boy, repeatedly, that he’s just arrived in the country and isn’t going to look at, much less buy, any carpets. He came to Istanbul, at least in part, because in a world gone awry he needs to be taken by something magical, even perhaps a carpet ride, but he isn’t buying anything just yet.

The boy is gone less than two minutes before another rug peddler hits on Travers. He is short and swarthy, and his English is halting—but he’s still able to promise a better deal than whatever the young man offered. Travers retreats through the courtyard’s exit into what’s left of the Hippodrome. The Brazen Column, the Egyptian Obelisk plundered from Luxor, and the Serpentine Column taken from Delphi are all that remain of the huge stadium that was Constantinople’s hub. He walks through the park thinking about the layers of fallen empires here—Egyptian, Macedonian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman. He sits, finally, on a park bench by a fountain in a garden half-way between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, the 1,500-year-old Byzantine church. As the sun slips behind the stone wall, the light holds on the golden tips of the domes of both the mosque and the former church.

Travers watches the young men with their cell phones, the families with their veiled women, and the children racing to and from the fountain. Two boys, dressed in matching blue shorts and shirts, squabble near him, their words unclear but their tones unmistakable. For a moment, he is watching his own sons, Tom and Jason. He misses that squabbling, in a sense longs for it, though he knows he’ll never again be referee or arbiter—or father. So much attention was given to Jason, the prodigal son, that Tom, as the dutiful firstborn, finally came to feel estranged. That and Tom’s current need to keep peace with his mother still require a certain distance from Travers that neither of them ever mentions in their biweekly calls.