

LESS THAN
A SHADOW

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This is a work of fiction. Any similarity of characters or events to real persons or actual events is coincidental.

PART ONE:
THE ASIAN MOON

CHAPTER 1

THE MOON, waning but breathless, poured pale light on the Bosphorus. The whole city turned out to watch, crowding the restaurants and bars as the moon rose over the hills, releasing a column of light into the water that spread wider and brighter as it rose higher. In no other place on earth did it happen so well, so fine a thing it had been given a name—*mehtap*. Not even the flashers from the patrol cars could detract from the beauty of Istanbul by the Asian moon.

Levent left his driver at the wheel of the Renault in the parking lot by the foot of the quay and walked to the street fronting the Bosphorus. Six uniformed police cordoned the waterside, and two more stood at the entrance to the third building on the left. It was painted yellow with Ottoman blue trim at the windows. An unfortunate choice. A counter at the left in the lobby should have been occupied by a doorman, but was vacant. Nor was a uniform in sight with so many outside.

Levent pushed the button for the lift. Told by the machine it was engaged, he took the stairs to the third floor. As he climbed the marble steps, he realized he had some memory of the building. How long ago? Twenty years? In those days, the area was a slum uncomplicated by the demands of the tourist trade. In this building—invaluable today—was a painter's workshop, and a painter. He was a demented man said to have some talent when sober. That happened as often as the bars ran out of raki.

Levent had met him one night about this time—two o'clock in the morning. He and several of his friends were found hanging from the trees in the small park that once stood across the street. The *artistes* were as talkative as monkeys as they swung in the air. The painter said he was a plum. The poet said he was a pear. The ceramist said he was a bunch of grapes, which he emphasized by draping his balls out of one pocket.

Such was the fruit of the raki tree, which could be blamed for most of the crime in Istanbul. The rest was Mafia. Levent was sure he could smell alcohol, or one of the seven major crime syndicates in the city, as he entered the third floor hall by the stairwell.

The first things he saw were three uniformed police and Sergeant Mehmet Besh. Worse, Besh had seen him.

“Inspector, this way,” he said, indicating the door to Number Six. “Pending your arrival, nothing has been disturbed.”

“That would be an improvement. After you tell me who found the body, see that a uniform is put in the lobby.”

Besh had never understood an insult in his short life. He drew himself up to his full height, which was slightly more than five feet tall. Even so, he was more stunted than small.

“The doorman found the body, Inspector. He was alerted by the smell.”

Levent was beginning to be. Some odors stormed the senses like an army, while others crept in from a distance until nothing existed or could exist but that singular thing.

“Where is the doorman?”

“At the hospital, sir. He sickened when he saw what had happened. He is not a strong man.”

“What did he have to say about the occupant of these rooms?”

“That he knew the man only by sight,” said Besh. “He suggested talking to the owner of the apartments.”

The landlord was probably in Bodrum for the weather. He would know nothing and refer matters back to his doorman. As Levent moved into the apartment, he saw no obvious reason for the doorman to require medical attention. The bath was clear of blood, and most of the single spacious room. There was, however, a victim.

Male. His skin was pale, more white than pink. He lay slumped face down at the table before the window that looked out to the Bosphorus, as if he had enjoyed the view until the last moment.

At the base of the victim’s skull his light brown hair was matted with blood. A rather large entry wound. That was certainly what had killed, or over-killed, him.

“The crime scene was quickly secured, Inspector. Even the money is intact.”

A disordered mound of paper bills lay on the table, too. The pot. Three hands were face-down. Poker hands. Five-card draw. The discards had been put aside—seven. They lay in a pile to the right of the pot that contained thirty million lira. Fifteen dollars more or less, given the rate of inflation, which was said to be moderating but could still be called hyperinflation. So there must have been fifty million when the patrolmen arrived. Possibly more.

“Those two at the entrance,” said Levent, “are they the ones who took the call?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Find out how much they got.”

Besh’s small eyes, brown but crabbed, widened. “Inspector?”

“The patrolmen left enough on the table to make this look plausible,” said Levent. “Find out what they took. Tell them it will come from their pay if I have to guess.”

“Sir, I do not think—”

“That’s correct, Besh. Never think. Do what I say.”

“Yes, sir.”

Besh did not mean that and in fact was angry, which was not a good thing. Six months ago, on the theory the police force required purity of faith to match that of the government, Besh had been assigned from Traffic Division to Homicide. His talent was his kinship with the mayor of one of the suburban districts. Like all barbarians, the mayor and his protégé thought everyone but them was corrupt.

Levent had little hope Besh would discover the truth of the embezzlement. The Inspector of Homicide simply wished to be alone in the room with nothing to disturb his impressions.

The victim’s hair to the right of the entry wound was singed. Powder burns. The weapon had been discharged at a close distance. No, an intimate distance. Levent stood in the position the killer had taken. Three feet. Possibly less. Hello, friend.

Could it have been a friend? The pattern of blood spatters was consistent with a bias to the right, scattered along the victim’s ear, the collar of his shirt, and ending in a dark gob on the spindle of the chair.

Judging by the discards, the killer could have folded his hand after the bet and gone to the bathroom, which lay directly behind. On his return, he paused to part his victim’s skull with a nine-millimeter or better. That assumed he was concerned with being neat, which he seemed to have been. One bullet with no expended round marked him as a practiced assassin or a concerned environmentalist.

The victim apparently sat down to gamble with professionals of one sort or the other. That bothered Levent because the Mafia rarely chose to hide their crimes. They liked the public to know what risk came to anyone who opposed the gangs. Often their assassinations were carried out in daylight on public streets with no thought for