

FLARE

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CHAPTER TWO

“No American has ever been injured in Turkey as a result of terrorism.”

Phil Sheridan raised an eyebrow, then quickly decided not to respond. He hadn't come to this party to get into an argument, especially with Faruk Günay, the Under-Secretary to the Turkish Ambassador to the United Nations. Instead, he stroked his short beard, nodded agreeably, and looked around for an escape route.

“The United States is one of the most violent countries in the hemisphere,” Günay continued.

Thick black hair frosted on the sides, salt-and-pepper mustache, impeccable tuxedo—who would argue with that? Günay ostentatiously produced a silver pocket watch, glanced at the time, and slipped it back into his pocket. Phil lifted a drink from a waiter's tray and took the opportunity to move quietly away. Günay turned his attention to the other guests hovering around him, his intense gray eyes hungry for an argument.

Phil tried to be as pleasant and agreeable as possible, but if his company hadn't insisted that he attend this reception, he would never have come. The overly decorated condominium on Park Avenue was ostentatious and stuffy, and the guests, with the exception of one young lady, were equally pompous.

The space was divided into two levels. A loft decorated with Turkish carpets and gold embroidered wall hangings overlooked the cavernous living room. Everything looked brand new. The room smelled faintly of perfume and fresh paint.

Günay arched his thin eyebrows and ranted on about violence in the United States. Phil was glad he backed out of the conversation. But the portly man in the worn suit whom Phil recognized as a reporter from the *Times* wasn't so restrained.

“Terrorism is a global disease,” the reporter said, imprudently slurping his glass of champagne. “Turkey isn't immune from violence.”

“We have one of the safest records in the hemisphere,” Günay replied, rising to the challenge.

“I can tell you some stories about Turkey,” a young woman remarked. “I was in Istanbul during the trouble last month.” Both her accent and the nature of her remark suggested she was well traveled. Phil had been watching her all evening. There was something about her that arrested his eye and wouldn't let go--an exotic, wild beauty that made him want to meet her. He was determined to see if she provoked the same reaction up close.

“Trouble?” Günay asked. The thin eyebrows dropped in a cold frown and his eyes leveled on her like rapiers. She forced a dry smile and backed away, conveniently bumping into Phil.

Up close, she was even more arresting.

Phil offered to get her a drink and they stepped to a bar at the side of the room where a muscular bartender wrestled open a bottle of champagne. Phil suspected that he doubled as a security guard and bouncer.

"I guess the Ambassador didn't appreciate your remark," Phil said.

A bemused expression came over her face. "No. I don't think he did."

"So you were in Istanbul during the trouble last month?" he asked.

"I think I *was* the trouble in Istanbul last month. At least the local police seemed to think so." Her distinct accent made her even more intriguing to him. He recognized it immediately as Turkish. He had spent eight years in Turkey, before returning to the United States to attend High School in Upstate New York. The years in Turkey were one of the most exciting times of his life and he often caught himself wishing he could return. Tonight was no exception.

She maneuvered abruptly to avoid colliding with a tipsy guest. A bit of champagne spilled from her glass and splashed on the woolen fabric of his tux.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's rented."

"I would never have guessed. You look like you were born in a tuxedo."

"Thanks. But I'm not sure I fit in here."

"Why not?"

"Too many people trying to impress each other."

"I was thinking the same thing myself. It makes for the most boring party."

"I love your accent," he said. "It sounds Turkish. Where are you from?"

Her smile widened in approval. "I was born in Istanbul," she said.

"Really? What part? Let me guess. Bebek." He had named an upper-class suburb.

Her smile faded a little. "Would it surprise you to know I was born in the poorest section?" Her smile was gone, but the softness of her eyes made Phil bold.

"Where you're born isn't important." He looked for a way to recover her smile.

"You're out of place here--an incredibly interesting person at the most boring party in New York City. What's your name?"

"Leyla."

"Leyla..."

"Leyla Orthia Menderes."

"Leyla Orthia Menderes. I like the sound of that. Like the wind on the Anatolian plateau."

"Are you always so poetic?" she asked. The beginning of a smile curved the corners of her mouth.

"No, usually I just put my foot in my mouth. I guess it's the champagne."

"I like the way it sounds when you say it. Your pronunciation is perfect." She flashed her biggest smile yet.

"I have to confess, I spent some time in Adana. My name is Phil Sheridan. I even remember a few words of Turkish."

"More than a few words, I'd bet, Mr. Phil Sheridan."

Her dark eyebrows arched inquiringly, but Phil decided not to answer the unspoken question.

He motioned to her empty glass. "Would you like another drink?"

"Would you like to leave the most boring party in New York City?" she asked.

"Am I picking you up?"

"Don't be so male. I'm picking *you* up."

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

“There’s a diner near here. We can walk.”

Light drizzle began to wet the cobblestone sidewalk in front of the Ambassador’s residence. A row of small trees, more brown than green, were probably grateful for the rain. Phil was grateful too, since it gave him the opportunity to huddle closely with Leyla under her small umbrella.

They hadn’t gone more than three blocks when Phil asked, “Should anyone be following us?”

“You noticed.”

Phil waved to a cab. It raced past without stopping. A second cab on the opposite side of the street swerved across three lanes, cutting off a driver who leaned on his horn. The cab screeched to a halt in front of Phil and Leyla.

Phil opened the door with one hand and helped Leyla in with the other. As he slammed the door behind him, he watched the man in a black raincoat less than a block away hail another cab.

“Lose that cab,” Phil said to the driver. A dark-skinned man wearing a turban smiled from the license displayed on the dashboard.

“You are making the joke with me,” the driver said.

Phil stared at the wide brown eyes in the mirror. He thrust a twenty-dollar bill at the driver.

“Lose it!”

The wheels screeched on the wet stones and Phil was thrown back in his seat. He put one arm around Leyla and held her tightly.

“Hang on. This guy is really into it.”

The cab cornered sharply onto Seventh Avenue without slowing. Leyla and Phil slid across the vinyl seat into the door. He held her more closely. Her face was only inches away. When he looked into her eyes, it wasn’t fear that he saw there but the bright glint of eagerness.

“This is definitely more interesting than the party,” she said.

Phil glanced out the rear window. The cab following them turned just as sharply. He became more serious.

“The question is,” he said, “who is being followed here? Me or you?”

“Should we stop him and ask?”

“That might not be such a bad idea,” he said. He was sure that it was one of his friends, or maybe one of Leyla’s friends playing some kind of joke.

“You’re not serious!”

Phil whispered his instructions to the driver. At the next corner, the driver slowed suddenly and Phil opened the door. A second later he was out. Before Leyla could object, Phil had slammed the door and ducked into the shadow of a doorway. The cab sped off, just as the following cab came around the corner. Phil leapt out of the doorway and sprinted after them both. Ahead, the cab with Leyla stopped abruptly at the corner.

The following cab slammed on its brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision.

In another moment, Phil was at the back door of the second cab. He pulled it open.

And stared into the black hole of a forty-five automatic.

“Now what?” Phil asked. It never occurred to him that Leyla might be part of a world where men would carry an automatic.

“Get in,” a gruff voice ordered. The face was still in shadow. As Phil slid onto the torn vinyl seat, the distinctive odor of cheap cologne assailed his nostrils.

A moment later, Leyla appeared at the half-open window on the other side. She calmly leaned inward and pressed the barrel of a silver revolver against the head of the man inside. His hand faltered a moment, but he didn’t lower his gun.

Phil slipped his own hand into his coat pocket. He pushed his index finger against the fabric, hoping it would look convincing, and simultaneously ordered the man to drop his gun.

“You gonna poke me to death?” the gruff voice asked.

Leyla cocked the hammer of her revolver. The clicking sound had an immediate effect. He dropped his gun onto the seat. Phil picked it up.

The cab driver swiveled in his seat. “Are you guys cops?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Phil said.

“Get out of my cab. Now.” His Jersey accent had a ring of authority.

“What?”

“You guys wanna play cops and robbers--do it in someone else’s cab. Not mine.”

Phil looked around. Other cabs edged around the stopped vehicle. Leyla stood close to the window, concealing her weapon as best she could. Although passersby ignored the scene, Phil didn’t want anyone to notice the weapon. He pushed the automatic into his pocket.

“Get out,” the driver repeated.

Phil backed out of the cab. The man moved across the seat and stopped halfway through the door. In the orange light of the street lamp, Phil saw his face clearly for the first time--the tired visage of an eastern-European immigrant. Steely blue eyes peered from beneath thin eyebrows. His square jaw was set in an expression of determination.

“Know how to use that?” the man asked.

“You want to find out?”

“You going to shoot me on the street?”

Before Phil could answer, the man pushed him backward with surprising force. He stumbled on the curb, catching himself with his free hand. By that time, the man was half a block away, sprinting into the rainy night.

Leyla ran around the back of the vehicle just as it spun its wheels and screeched into the yellow river of cabs streaming over the busy street.

“I let him get away,” Phil said.

“It wasn’t your fault.” She slid one hand under his arm and pulled him to his feet. He was surprised at her strength, which seemed out of proportion to her small frame.

“But we didn’t find out much,” Phil said, brushing the water off his pants. The faint odor of strong cologne still hung in the air, mixing with the street smells of rotting food and auto exhaust.

“What are you talking about?” Leyla asked. “We found out everything we need.”

“We did?”

“What did you notice about him?” Leyla asked.

“He was pretty damn strong,” Phil said.

“What else?”

“Croatian accent.”

“Very good. You know your languages. Anything else?”

Phil shrugged. “Dark hair, gruff sounding.”

“That’s it?”

“What else was there?” he asked.

“Expensive Hong Kong suit. Italian loafers. Designer watch. Handmade shirt, also Hong Kong.”

“You’re amazing,” Phil said.

“Broken nose, swollen earlobes-- so we know he’s a fighter.”

“What about that horrible cologne he was wearing? He must have taken a bath in it.”

“I didn’t smell anything. You have a good nose.”

“So I’ve been told. Anyway, I can get a friend of mine in the police department to run a check on his gun” he patted his pocket.

Leyla shook her head. “Waste of time. Keep it. You may need an untraceable weapon sometime.”

Phil looked alarmed. “I hope not.”

“Then keep it as a souvenir.”

“Look, Phil said,” there’s no reason anyone would send a thug like that after me. Under the circumstances, I think it’s safe to assume that he was following you. Would you like to tell me why?”

“Don’t be so sure he wasn’t following you, Phil.” She had a mischievous look on her face.

“What about the trouble in Turkey?”

“My apartment is a couple of blocks from here. Would you like to come up for a drink? I’ll tell you all about it.”

She lived on the second floor of a bank building that had been converted to apartments. When Leyla stepped into the kitchen to find a couple of glasses and a bottle of “something sweet”, Phil studied the room, hoping to find a clue to her character.

At one end of the main room, a row of three tall windows with no coverings extended from the ornate plaster moldings on the ceiling to the dark oak floor. In the very center, the warmth of an exquisite oriental carpet surrounded by a cluster of antique chairs and a soft leather sofa subdued the coldness of the bleak stone walls. The room was decorated almost too well, too cleanly. It had the look of a traveler, of someone who could move in a hurry.

“This is a beautiful place,” Phil said when she returned. “Your decoration skills are fantastic. It’s like a museum, only more livable.”

“I found this down in Soho,” Leyla said, indicating a lamp next to the sofa. She switched it on and light streamed warmly through amber mica panels fixed in a copper frame.

“Do you like it?”

“I’ve always liked Arts and Crafts style,” Phil said.

“You have no idea what I had to go through to get it. It’s not a reproduction.” She plopped onto the sofa and crossed her legs. She looked delicate and pampered, but Phil guessed that she had a strength and stamina carefully hidden beneath her slender beauty.

“I could have guessed that,” he said, examining one of the mica panels closely. “I’ve an idea that you would never be satisfied with anything but the real McCoy.”

“The real what?”

“It means it’s not a fake. It’s a beautiful lamp. Do you have any idea why a thug from Eastern Europe would be following you?”

“I still say he may have been following you.”

“At the party, you mentioned some trouble in Istanbul. In fact, you implied that you were the center of it.”

“I was being cute. It was nothing. I purchased some artifacts from a dealer and ran into some trouble at the airport. The customs officials accused me of smuggling. The local newspapers got the story and there were some demonstrations. I think the whole thing was orchestrated by the government”.

“Most countries take a pretty dim view of removing antiquities.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

Phil surveyed the apartment. What he saw convinced him that she wasn’t being very truthful. On the mantel, next to a Roman figurine carved from ivory and a small ceramic tablet, was a pre-Columbian pot with exquisitely delicate line work. He knew one Central American government that would give almost anything to have it back.

“Do you know a lot about antiques?” she asked.

“A little...not very much really, my parents collected them.”

In truth, his parents had been serious collectors, a passion that ensnared his father after he entered the Foreign Service. Phil often accompanied his father on buying trips around the Middle East. In the Turkish flea markets and the Greco-Roman ruins that dotted the countryside Phil absorbed an education about antiquities that most dealers would envy.

He stepped up to the mantle and examined the pot. Next to it was an ordinary ceramic tablet, one of thousands that could be found in Turkish ruins. Dozens of finely-etched cuneiform figures delicately filled the surface. He was faintly surprised to see such an ordinary item perched between such splendid antiques.

“Do you usually carry a revolver?” he asked.

“I had to go into a very bad neighborhood earlier today.”

Leyla filled two small glasses with cognac and handed one to Phil.

“Do you know how to use it?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. “Just put some in your mouth and swallow it, like this.” She took a sip of the cognac.

Phil laughed. Leyla was so sure of herself. An expression of delight seemed to be a permanent feature of her eyes.

“How about you, Phil. Are you the real McCoy?”

Pressed with her cheerfulness, Phil felt his defensive attitude crumble. “What do you do when you’re not picking up men at boring parties?” he asked.

An expression of innocence replaced the coy smile. “Believe it or not, I don’t usually do such things. I needed an excuse to leave, an escort home...”

“Is that all?”

“No. I like you. You’re intelligent.”

“How do you know that?”

“Those deep blue eyes. They’re compelling, confident. But you don’t brag about what you know. You keep quiet and I can tell you know a lot more than you let on.”

Phil felt himself blushing.

“But you’re really nice,” she continued, “not stuffy. I watched you at the party. You treat people like they matter. Even the waiters. So what were you doing in Turkey?”

“I went to an American boy’s school in Istanbul. My father was attached to the American embassy there.”

“Where else have you been?”

“I don’t get to travel very much. The vase. Is it real?” He nodded toward the mantel.

“Oh...I don’t think so.”

Phil knew that the vase was real, and that it was worth a small fortune. He also understood the wisdom of concealing that information since she didn’t know him very well. And he intended to change that.

Before he left he insisted on leaving the automatic with her, explaining that he felt uncomfortable carrying it around the city. She pushed an ornamental ivory button on the side of an Ottoman and a secret drawer popped open. Phil found it interesting that she trusted him enough to reveal the secret drawer, but not enough to admit that the pot was genuine. She slid the gun into the drawer and pushed it closed. It became invisible against the ornamental wooden surface of the Ottoman.

Over the next week he called her after work on two evenings. She called him at work three times. They talked about movies, art, food, archaeology and antiques. Although he enjoyed the conversations, he made up his mind to move slowly with her, for several reasons. He didn’t want her to think that his primary interest in her was sexual. It wasn’t. She was desirable and seductive, and good-looking in a way that no man could ignore. She had probably known many men who were only interested in conquering an impossibly beautiful woman. But he was more enchanted by the animation of her character, by her cleverness, by her confidence.

He was also intrigued by the mystery of the man in the cab with a gun, the secret drawer in the Ottoman, and the priceless antiquities. He worried that he might be a little too attracted to the fantasy of the mysterious Middle-Eastern beauty. But whenever he felt like she might be a little too serenely wise or sophisticated for him, she would call him at work and be as playful as a schoolgirl. It would put him at ease, though he knew instinctively that she was far more worldly and experienced than she let on.

On Friday he agreed to pick her up at her apartment. They had a date to see an off-Broadway show. She invited him in and poured two glasses of her favorite drink, a sweet cognac. As she moved about the apartment, her dark hair spilled gracefully over the rounded curves of her shoulders. The short, blue silk dress she wore did little to conceal the soft curves beneath. She placed the glasses on the small table in front of the sofa and invited Phil to sit next to her. She handed him a glass of cognac. The dress rose alarmingly high and he pretended not to notice her long, smooth thighs.

“Do you mind that I call you at work?” she asked.

“Not at all. I really enjoy talking to you. I look forward to it.”

“You’re sweet. I bet lots of woman call you.”

“Not really.”

“You know Phil, you have a really honest face, I mean, besides being good-looking and everything, you have a face that makes people want to trust you, even confide in you.”

“Do you have something you want to tell me?” he asked.

There was an eager spark in her eyes. “Just that you treat me like someone important, someone worth listening to. You make me feel special, like you really care about what I have to say, like it’s important.”

“It is. When we talked about the early Anatolian people in central Turkey, you made some very insightful comments. Made me think about things in a different way.”

“Really?” Her smile broadened in approval.

“You may have changed my thinking about Anatolian people.”

“You’re one of the nicest men I’ve met since coming to this country.”

She moved closer and his hand fell from the back of the sofa and drifted into the hollow of her back. He thought he could feel her breathe on his neck and his heart lurched madly. He wondered if they were ever going to get to the show. Not that he cared much at that point. He decided he’d better finish his drink.

He sipped the cognac. It seared his tongue and throat like a flame. He coughed slightly and tried to suppress a grimace.

She laughed, again. “I’m sorry. You’re not used to it. You spilled a bit on your shirt.”

“Yuck,” he said. “I’ve made a sticky mess. I may need a towel or something.”

“The bathroom is down there.” She waved her arm toward the hallway.

The bathroom was as exquisite as the rest of the apartment. Hand-laid arabesque tiles surrounded the tub and pedestal sink. The bathroom looked new, and was definitely too elaborate for a rental unit. He began to wonder if she owned or rented the place.

The stain on his shirt disappeared slowly as he blotted it with a towel. He turned on the hot water to wash his hands and make sure he hadn’t spilled any of the sticky fluid into his beard. The pipes squealed and pounded loudly. He adjusted the flow and the squealing only increased.

Typical old plumbing, he thought, water hammer and air. The noise increased, and seemed to be coming from the front room. It sounded strangely human. He shut off the tap, but the noise from the front room continued.

It wasn’t just the plumbing.

It was screaming.

He yanked open the heavy oak door and raced down the hallway.

In the living room, Leyla struggled with a short figure in a dark suit. A small table rolled onto its side.

He bolted into the room, and realized his mistake too late. At the same moment that he became aware of a second man behind him, he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in the back of his neck. The impact knocked him to his knees. The last thing he remembered before everything went black was the strong smell of cologne.