

CHAPTER ONE

RUNNING to board the overnight Mavi Express leaving Istanbul, Leigh was hampered by the large red backpack she wore, and as she swung up the steep steel steps of the train, the heaviness came close to toppling her backward. Leigh hit the landing hard, turned right, and the baggage on her back propelled her down a narrow blue-everywhere hall as if she were tumbling through a vein seeking oxygen. She stopped abruptly at an open compartment doorway; Nicole, younger and faster, was already bouncing on a long seat, grinning up at her.

“I knew we’d make it,” Leigh said, breathing hard, her long heavy hair sticking to her neck.

“Check it out!” said Nicole, throwing her arms out at the private compartment with fold-out bunk beds, a sink, wrapped soap and a heater.

“I just love trains,” said Leigh, looking around. “Are you sure this is ours?” She shrugged out of her shiny red pack. “For twenty dollars I didn’t expect anything more than a seat.”

Nicole handed her ticket to Leigh. “Look.” She pointed to some numbers, and they both stepped into the hall to stare at the plaque beside their door. Satisfied, they returned to investigate the compartment.

Leigh worked on the window clasp, and then tugged

with her whole body until it gave.

“The window opens! Look!”

She opened the window all the way and was able to hang the upper half of her body out of it. Leigh hung her head down, and her hair fell away from her back and neck. She pulled an elastic off her wrist and pulled her hair into a high ponytail. As she stretched and pulled back into the compartment, Nicole came to stand beside her. Tired from the increasingly intense rush it had been to get there, they stood silently, side by side, their bodies loose, ready for the train to jerk and roll. They were the same height, and from the back, looked the same age, although Nicole was ten years shy of Leigh’s 32. Nicole’s blond head bent toward the cuticles she was picking at; Leigh’s auburn ponytail swayed as she sucked diesel-flavoured air through the open window.

Leigh watched the lights on the mounds of hills surrounding them. Some flickered, even seemed to go out; they were dull orange, like shaded 40-watt bulbs. The muted light simmered in windows, some without panes. The unpainted houses around the track were small and dilapidated. They sprawled together on the hillside, some slipping a bit. The tiny yards were rough with rock and wild vegetation. Uneven stone walls bordered the plots, their arms wrapped around the shoulders of neighbouring houses. A few roses in rusted cans provided the only colour: oranges and reds grinned fiercely in the dusk.

Leigh caught a whiff of barbecuing lamb and raised her nose, searching through the train smells for more. Her eyes examined the impoverished hillside shore and found smoke telling of tender savoury grill. No, Leigh

would not remember Istanbul as poor. For a week, the rich sounds of Turkish music had infused even her dreams at night, and the call to prayer, “*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar*”, had sired through her brain early each morning.

Leigh and Nicole had stayed beside the Blue Mosque, and its exotic shadows had followed them as they’d explored the old walled area of Sultanahmet. Their senses had opened hungrily to the new sights and smells; they’d rounded every twisted street wide-eyed and greedy for more. Chestnuts shook on smoky carts. Bright carpets and vests, decorative tiles and plates splashed orange and turquoise on the brown streets like a painting still dripping wet.

And the men! Dark attractive men!

“Excuse me, you drop something back there. It was my heart!”

“Did you buy your carpet yet?”

“You are too white. Are you British?”

“Excuse me, can I hassle you? Where from you get this hair? You get this hair in America?”

Part of Istanbul’s allure for both women had been the real possibility of danger. They’d gone to a teahouse crowded with men and smoked an apple concoction in oversized water bonges. They’d seen a stranger on the street harassed into a corner by police and then punched over and over. They’d been followed by a few admirers and slightly alarmed, had difficulty shaking them. One had followed them back to Ipek Pension and stood in the dark rose-filled courtyard below their window for an hour.

Three months previous, Leigh had arrived in Paris

alone on an impulsive, even desperate, leave of absence from her job. Solo, France had been a lark, but in Rome, street urchins had robbed her and slit her confidence. Guardedness had been new for Leigh, and so uncomfortable, that she'd quickly picked up travel-savvy Nicole as a companion and had shed caution with relief. She'd found Nicole at an island wedding in Greece, drinking *Ouzo* and loudly congratulating anyone who'd listen. Since then, it had been easier to indulge in her love of the unknown, to choose streets with shadows and buses with unrecognizable destinations.

The train jerked and started to move.

Leigh hooted, "Here we go! Good-bye Istanbul! Good-bye," she yelled to the stragglers on the platform.

"Hey, where're you from? I have nice carpets to show you!" Nicole called to a young man.

"Oh my God, I dropped something," yelled Leigh to another. "It was your heart!"

As the train got faster, the two women got louder and louder, and in the excitement, a black dog raced along the track beside them.

They called to the people they now sped by, "*Allahasmarladik!* Good-bye!"

A porter knocked on their door and motioned for them to be quiet. His gestures were stern, but he had trouble keeping his straight lips in place, and his eyes revealed admiration. The women didn't realize what a stir they sometimes caused.

When the train finally wound its way out of the sprawling mess of concrete, steel and fumes that made up Istanbul, the women took their seats facing each other, their feet resting on their packs on the floor between

them. Leigh automatically reached for the guidebook which was right where she'd left it in a side pocket. She returned to one of the many dog-eared pages and resumed her research. Her delicate face was hidden by the book, and her slim straight body looked more boyish than ever, in jeans cut off above her knees and a white t-shirt that said in her own writing: "India or bust".

"Why are we going to Cappadocia first?" asked Nicole, surprising Leigh. Nicole had given up maps long ago.

"I just had an urge."

The urge had been almost a thought. That same morning, Leigh had decided to change direction entirely and travel in a clockwise circle around western Turkey, heading toward the dry central area of Cappadocia first instead of last.

Nicole was pulling clothes and make-up out of her backpack, looking for something. "An urge?"

"I'm listening to my heart." Leigh had given up trying to control her life. She'd promised God on the day she bought the ticket to Paris: You're the wind; I'm the leaf.

Nicole snorted. "Is your heart spelling things out for you there in the guidebook?"

Leigh laughed and put it down. "What are you looking for?"

"A tape. Can I have a turn with the Walkman?" She'd left hers under a tree in Greece where she'd been picking olives for a month to make a little money.

Leigh passed the yellow plastic box to her, and Nicole popped in some Tom Petty.

"God," said Leigh, grabbing a pile of crumpled

papers from beside Nicole. "What's all this?"

Once again awed by Nicole's carelessness, she smoothed out the receipts, bills, *lira*, tickets for buses and entrances, sorting them into two piles: important and garbage.

"Where'd you get *dinar*?" asked Leigh, but Nicole's eyes were shut, and her fingers tapped to the music in her ears. She was in tight white: a vest without a t-shirt, short shorts and a cap over blond hair shorn by her drunk self only a few weeks ago. Nicole had every curve that Leigh did not, but she didn't seem to notice the jaws she dropped.

The overly-attentive porter checked on them several times before finally making up their beds and leaving them for the night. They tucked into the supper they'd picked up on the street across from their pension: chickpeas with mint, a tomato and cucumber salad, garlic yogurt, a *baguette*. Immediately after eating, Nicole went to sleep in the top bunk.

Leigh gazed out the window, spending her turn on the Walkman with new Blue Rodeo. Her legs curled under her on the lower bunk, and she leaned on the window, a black notebook in her lap. A clear plastic book-cover protected the notebook; a piece of French lavender was tucked under it. She had written in it a bit: about places, like the Roman aqueduct at Avignon, and about people, like the pizza guy in Florence. Tonight it sat unopened on her lap.

Leigh watched the lighted boats on the black Bosphorus slide by. Water became rounded hills, and they rolled past in the dark. She would not see water again until they reached the Mediterranean Sea to the

south in a couple of weeks.

The train click-clacked through the fluids of the night rocking Leigh into thought. It was a time for thought because at that moment, her happiness with the unknown was absolute. She felt strangely excited, yet sure and calm, about being carried out of Istanbul by that train at that moment. She was certain that all was well, that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

She'd been heading toward Turkey for months. She was at ease here, more so than Spain or Italy or Greece. The further east she got, the more comfortable she felt. Turkey was the most unusual place she'd ever been, but it was somehow hers, like a story she could almost remember. Her feet had known the streets of Istanbul and the first time she'd heard the call to prayer, her heart had ached, like it did for things she'd lost: the amethyst she'd found Up North and carried in her pocket for years, the words to songs, her big sister.

The next morning, they taxied from the train to a waiting bus in Ankara for the four-hour trip to Goreme. The bus was almost empty, yet it was staffed with a driver and a porter. Leigh and Nicole collapsed in the large seats and fell asleep before the bus even heaved awake. The middle-aged porter was amused by the two bare-legged foreigners who stretched without shame over double seats and slept the whole way to Cappadocia. He didn't have to offer the sleeping women the usual cologne to wash their hands followed by tea, but he did wake them up as they entered Cappadocia. Sitting up heavily, they stared open-mouthed, stunned by the change in their surroundings.

Cappadocia was dry and dusty, almost entirely soft rock. Locals called it the “Gate to Hell.” Leigh reported to Nicole that it was a collection of volcanoes, volcanic rock and stone structures shaped by centuries of wind. The parched beige rock flowed in giant liquid-looking waves for miles. Thin trees and bushes grew between cracks. In places, thirty-metre-tall thin rocks rose like petrified plants. The structures were bent sand-castle towers with a darker rock balanced on top, looking very similar to giant circumcised penises.

Beige and brown mammoth stone shapes reached into the sky forming cliffs of bearded gnome faces under pointed hats. Their eyes were random black holes dotting the rocks: crooked windows and rounded doorways high on the face of steep cliffs. Caves.

The bus stopped to unload them at a closed bus depot.

“Goreme!” announced the porter. He carried their backpacks to the top of the steps and threw them onto the ground with a splash of dust.

Leigh and Nicole followed sheepishly, still stunned by sleep and change, and found themselves at the edge of a rock village, a white sun overhead. The bus station was a grey hut set on the road that marked the bottom of the hill that was Goreme. A woman on the street glanced at Nicole’s bare muscular legs and quickly looked away. She was covered from head to toe except for her serious face and one visible hand pulling a small boy along beside her.

Leigh looked around and said, “It’s Bedrock!”

Nicole laughed and reached for her pack. “Well, let’s go find Fred and Barney!”

Much earlier that day, Ahmet had shivered waiting for the four a.m. bus from Antalya to the south. He’d sat in front of the closed bus depot on the bench with two other touts, freezing in his green wool suit jacket. He’d been hoping for tourists needing a place to stay, but the odds were against him. Three of them waiting for business were too many for the few tourists late September brought. Ahmet’s charisma and excellent English gave him a huge advantage, but he was an outsider in Goreme. The villagers suspected that the little business they had was being overtaken by non-locals. Sometimes, if there was only one couple or group, Ahmet would let the other touts take it.

Ahmet wore shiny black shoes and black jeans with his wool suit jacket. The older man sitting beside him wore a patched suit jacket over baggy pants and a cap. The younger fellow beside him, Kenan, was in jeans and a black leather jacket. All three leaned forward, smoking and talking animatedly about soccer and the summer’s World Cup final games. Turkey had gone all the way to the semi-finals with Brazil, and the men still entertained what-ifs. They talked about the soccer players they loved, injuries and odds. Then they mourned the dwindling number of tourists.

As the bus appeared down the road, Kenan said, “Ahmet, you need a woman tonight?”

“Yes, if it’s a woman, she’s for me, and if it’s a man, he’s for you!”

The old man laughed at Kenan. “For your bed!” He laughed and choked on his hilarity. Then he cleared his throat and spat in the dirt.

Ahmet judged the speed of the oncoming bus. “It’s

not stopping.”

He was right. It roared by—high, shiny, metallic—and pelted them with grit. Ahmet flicked his butt to the ground and stood up. “No money for us.” He stretched.

The old man used his cane to stand up. He pointed to each of them. “No woman for you and no man for you.” He laughed loudly and then coughed hard for a moment.

The other two waited until he recovered, and then they each set off their separate ways.

“*Gule gule*,” they called. (Go smiling.)

Ahmet intended to meet the bus from Ankara at 12:50, but he lost track of time while visiting a friend’s carpet shop where a group of men smoked and drank tea, laughed and slapped their thighs. When he realized the afternoon was almost gone, he headed over to Helmut’s place to fix his stereo as promised.

Leigh’s research led them to a clean pension with a patio overlooking the ancient village of Goreme. The owner showed them their room with shower for ten dollars per night. They had not yet learned that “24 hour hot water,” was Turkish-English, meaning, “The water occasionally reaches lukewarm.”

They dropped their bags on twin beds, returned to the patio and sagged into plastic chairs. A cement counter with a sink stood to one side, but before them the stone floor dropped to a rock ravine. The view was astounding. As far as they could see, they were surrounded by bizarre rock formations.

The owner re-appeared and invited them into the

pension’s bar.

“It is cave,” he said. “Come. See.”

They ducked into a dark cool lounge with carpets and cushions spread on the floor. The roughhewn rock walls were covered with photos and odd bones. Their attention was caught immediately by two skulls hanging from a high spot in the uneven ceiling. One had sticks and clothes added to it to create a floating human shape.

“What kind of animal is that?” asked Leigh, her eyes adjusting to the dark.

“Human,” said the owner proudly.

Leigh and Nicole met eyes.

“What are you doing with human skulls?” Leigh’s voice was high when she wanted it to be indignant.

“It is nice. You like?”

“No,” said Nicole. “Where did you get them?”

“Garden. We dig. We find all garden,” he gestured at the walls.

Warily, Nicole sat down on a floor cushion.

“What’s this?” asked Leigh, touching the smooth glass of a big blue eye hanging on the wall.

“Protect us. Protect bar.”

“From what?”

“Evil eye.” He shuddered and rolled his eyes back in his head. “Village witch!” Then he barked a laugh at Leigh’s bugged eyes.

Leigh headed for the door. “Nicole,” she called, “Let’s go. I don’t think this is Fred and Wilma’s place.”

They spent the afternoon exploring the caves at

Zelve, a protected ruin outside Goreme. It was a large area, and they walked for hours through the isolated complex of caves, paths and steps worn edgeless by the wind.

As she wandered, Leigh separated from time and Nicole to become lost, to become an early Christian who had helped carve homes into the soft rock, hiding from the Romans and other invaders. She would have been a drone in one of the honeycombs of caves and underground cities that dotted the whole region. Generations of her family would have survived here, secluded in rock, far from the busy coastal routes, going underground when they needed safety. She told herself the story of that life, giving herself a handsome husband, scrappy children, a baby who never stopped crying in the damp. Leigh imagined the claustrophobia. She imagined the smells of underground barns and cooking, the water-carrying muscles, the dark, the fear, the faith.

Afterwards, they scouted the village of Goreme, which translated literally to “See Not”. Goreme was not *on* the side of a hill; it actually *was* the side of a hill that had been burrowed into. Dry paths curled around and up like fading fumes from the tour buses that charged by once a day, with Japanese faces pressed against the windows. The women climbed up and away from the paved road, up and away from noise. They climbed past caves that served as homes, barns and tractor garages. Leigh’s skin felt dry, not sticky, in the heat as they walked the dirt paths slowly in the sun, stepping aside for chickens and the occasional child. They walked every lane in the village until they were back at the bottom of the hill. Hoping for something to eat, they wandered

into a small building with a crude sign: Buzz Bar.

The bar was cool and dark. Squinting, Leigh could see it was one long narrow room with a stone fireplace and a stool at the far end. Carpets and old guns decorated the walls. Cushions lined the floor; there were no chairs. From the cushions, two men jumped up excitedly.

“Welcome, welcome,” they grinned broadly at the women.

“Can we eat here?”

“Of course you can eat here! Sit down. Sit down! Would you like tea?”

Leigh surveyed the empty room suspiciously. “Actually, we want something to eat.” Already they had become leery of invitations to tea. Leigh wondered if they were to be sold a carpet or a tour in this lair.

“Of course! What do you want to eat?”

“What do you have?”

“We have anything you want!” The taller man was buoyant, almost jubilant.

“Oh right,” said Nicole. “Do you have cheeseburgers? Onion rings?”

“We have Turkish food.” He rubbed his hands together. “What Turkish food do you like?”

“I don’t know,” mourned Leigh, the image of a cheeseburger now in her head.

“Can we see what’s cooking in the kitchen?” asked Nicole.

“Cooking? We cook anything you want! *Pide? Shish kebab?*”

Leigh’s eyes narrowed, and she focused on the attractive talkative one. “You don’t have a kitchen here,

do you?”

“We don’t need kitchen. We bring what you want. Five minutes.”

Leigh rolled her eyes at Nicole. “We have to see the food.”

“No problem. Come in the car. We take you to see food.”

Nicole’s blue eyes brightened, and she flashed a big smile at Leigh. “Let’s go!”

Considering the danger of getting in a car with two strangers in an unfamiliar country was not something either woman would do. They both faced each day like a birth—a little dazed, but willing to do it all. Nicole was unscarred, and still young enough to believe she was invincible. Leigh, on the other hand, knew that she welcomed danger for more disturbing reasons: a constant dissatisfaction with life, a willingness to die.

The odd foursome left the bar empty and unlocked. Right outside the front door, the quiet man got in a small green car on the driver’s side, and the taller sharper one got in beside him. Leigh and Nicole hopped in the back just as the car started and lurched. Still quiet, but grinning, the driver pressed on the gas pedal, his eyes in the rear-view mirror, watching the girls hurriedly slam doors. He had short brown curly hair and didn’t really look Turkish to Leigh.

It was the man seated beside him who had Leigh’s attention from the start—the talkative one with the good English. He was lean, with an angular proud face, and had a cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth. His dark hair was long and wavy; he constantly pushed it off his forehead. He was not still for a second, always

laughing and talking. Leigh watched him furtively. His rough unkemptness appealed to her.

Like a Turkish Marlboro Man, she decided.

They raced a short way to the main street of Goreme, to Sultana Restaurant. Leigh and Nicole exchanged smiles. They knew this place. Leaning against the cool glassed-in counter, they pointed to raw lamb *kebab* on metal skewers and a pot of white beans in tomato sauce because that was the only choice. It had been delicious at lunch.

“We take you where the sun sets,” said the tall one.

They jumped back in the car for a short tour while the *kebab* was cooked. Helmut was their driver and Leigh was sure he wouldn’t get three kilometres in Canada without having his license taken away. He drove on the wrong side of the road and raced and then slammed on the brakes. They laughed loud laughter and shrieked at the close calls during the frantic fifteen-minute ride.

The little car stopped deep in swirling dust on a small plateau leading to the edge of an enormous cliff. A decrepit sign had named this spot “Panoramic Viewpoint” for the tourists long ago. Leigh noted there was nothing else: no fences, lookouts, warnings, or benches. The reddish rock covered in reddish dust dropped straight down to reddish boulders. Bare beige and rust-red rocks spread far below them like a scene from another planet. The sun was orange and lower in the sky, but it still hit the rocks hard. There was nothing green in sight.

They walked along the plateau, adjacent to the drop. The attractive, as yet unnamed, man bounced all around Leigh and suddenly pretended to push her off

the cliff. A jolt of fear was instantly replaced by a thrilling rush. She recognized the compliment as she spun away from him, laughing at the scare. After that, they horsed around like twelve-year-olds.

He was comfortable with his body. Constantly moving and joking, it took all of Leigh's concentration just to keep track of him. He preened on the cliff, making sure she got a good look at him. She decided his shape fit his black jeans nicely.

They eventually all settled on the cliff, knees at the edge, legs swinging down. Lined up were a curly head, a blond, a length of auburn hair, and then shoulder-length black waves ending in unruly curls that could have belonged to either gender. Leigh looked way down. She didn't know how high it was, but she knew that if she fell, she'd die. Her mother would hyperventilate if she saw this. Leigh didn't know if she'd been born reckless, as her mother claimed, or if her personality had developed as a rebellion against her mother's many fears.

The men prevailed upon the women to smoke, and so they did. They quieted naturally as the sun lowered in the sky, and the light moved and faded on the moon-scape below them. Leigh looked sideways at the man with the gorgeous hair and dirty clothes and beyond him to the surreal lunar landscape. It occurred to her that she was a long way from home, but that she was still just Leigh.

The sun was half-hidden, and it became fuchsia. Leigh's thighs were prickly on the gritty dirt, and her lonely throat tightened on the smoke as she watched the sun disappear completely.

They returned to Buzz Bar in the dark. Ahmet used the newly-repaired stereo to play what he called "Turkish traditional music": a man's deep voice singing of something tragic. Helmut ran over to Sultana's for the food; then Leigh and Nicole were served a tasty meal in what they thought was true Turkish style. They sat on floor cushions set on two sides of a table at chest level. Three vertical half-cucumbers held up their black iron plates heaped with rice and *kebab* and beans.

"Join us," said Leigh. "There's lots."

But the locals refused, and the travellers chewed silently.

It was cool and Helmut built a fire, but Leigh's attention was still fixed on the man she now knew as Ahmet. She already sensed that it was unusual to see him as still as he was at that moment. He stared into the fire, waiting while the women ate. He leaned forward on the low wooden stool, his elbows resting on his knees, deep in thought. His eyes glowed dark in the firelight; his lips were curly even when serious. Wisps of hair brushed his neck, and she thought of touching him there.

The women finished eating and put down their forks. Then the men pulled cushions up to the low table and ate their leftovers. Leigh felt guilty then. She would have left more if she had known. Helmut poured tea and they talked.

They learned that Helmut's parents owned Buzz Bar. Helmut was German and Ahmet was Kurdish.

"So what's the problem with the Turks and the Kurds anyway?" asked Nicole, looking around for milk or creamer. "No milk?"

Helmut shook his head.

“We are second class citizens in Turkey.” Ahmet spoke with a great earnestness. “We are only allowed in the past few years to speak our language.”

“You mean it was illegal to speak Kurdish?” Leigh was incredulous.

“If it is true, I must say it. Many Kurds have been arrested and tortured for speaking our language.” Ahmet’s serious face commanded full attention when he spoke. He sat cross-legged at the tray and used it as a podium. “Ataturk made it illegal to speak Kurdish in 1923. At that time, eighty percent of people in the East could not speak Turkish. You see, every word they spoke was illegal. It is still illegal to call Eastern Turkey, ‘Kurdistan’ or speak about Kurdish rights or culture.”

Leigh was confused. “But Ataturk is the ‘Father of modern Turkey,’ and we saw his statues everywhere. Everyone seems to love Ataturk.”

“Who do you think ordered some men to build the statues?”

“Oh.”

“His real name was Kemal. He named himself ‘Ataturk’, father of Turkey. We are taught at school to love Ataturk. He made Turkey modern; it is true. He wanted Turkey same like Europe. But,” Ahmet held one finger in the air, “our history books do not teach us about Ataturk’s evil. He told the teachers what to teach and still, that is what the children are learning in school.” Ahmet spoke emphatically. “He wrote his own history in Turkey.”

“Oh,” said Leigh, a little embarrassed by his huge

delivery. She studied the undissolved sugar crystals in her small glass of clear brown tea on the table.

“Ataturk is responsible for 300,000 Kurds dead in just the first few years. Kurds do not love Ataturk.”

“Hey,” said Leigh, “I remember reading in the guidebook that tourists should be careful to not say anything disparaging against Ataturk because it’s a criminal offence.”

“Ataturk was a snake. He pushed a million of us to leave our homes. He burned the villages and sent us into the western cities. Do you know assimilation?”

“Yes,” said Leigh, and Nicole nodded.

“We are not allowed to leave our villages or else we are not allowed to stay! The men disappear. Curfews. Emergency measures. Interrogation. Torture.”

“Oh.”

“Oh.”

“I know a man who was tortured very badly because he had a tape of Kurdish music.” Ahmet sighed deeply and reached for a *sigara*. “He cannot use one arm now.” He struck a wooden match and looked into the flame before using it. Then he explained that if you were arrested in Turkey there was a 95 percent chance you’d be tortured. The Turks had been trained in torture two generations ago by the experts: Americans. Turkey even had torture treatment centres for survivors.

Leigh covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh my God, that’s terrible!” She met Nicole’s widened eyes.

Helmut cleared away the dishes and served more hot tea. Leigh figured he’d heard this conversation before.

“Is Kurdish culture very different from Turkish

culture?" asked Leigh.

"That is the first question." Ahmet sucked on the *sigara* and squinted with one eye. "Turkish and Kurdish." He blew out the smoke. "We both follow Islam. But then it is finished. We are not same. We have different histories. Our languages are from different places. We look different. We dress different. We want to celebrate our own culture. We want to teach our children in our own language. We want Kurdish universities. Some villages still have no electricity, telephones, running water, doctors, schools. Kurdish village life is very simple. We have lived in the mountains for thousands of years."

"But why are you part of Turkey?"

"After World War I, the Imperialists cut up Kurdistan and gave every country a piece. We did not speak for our rights. We are tribal people. We were not organized for independence. Stronger countries took our land: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey. We are sixty million people without freedom." He flicked his *sigara* ash toward the clay ashtray, and it landed on the table.

Ahmet explained that the Kurds in Turkey helped Ataturk fight Greece at the end of World War I. Ataturk claimed then that Turks and Kurds were equal and must unite to fight the invading Greeks. After humiliating the Greeks, Ataturk ignored a signed treaty that promised independence to Kurdistan.

"He ripped it up like garbage. The world did not care." Ahmet said that many of Ataturk's policies of ethnic cleansing were still enforced.

It was 1994. They also talked about Chechnya, Bosnia, peace and human nature. Ahmet was the only

optimist, surprising Leigh.

Helmut drummed the table. "We go now. Disco."

Nicole quickly agreed and stood up.

Ahmet and Leigh's bodies by then faced each other, shoulders square, their hands on the little table between them. Leigh thought that looking in his eyes was like looking in a mirror. She knew those eyes like her own.

"Belly dancer," said Helmut.

"Yes! Leigh, let's go!" said Nicole.

"I don't want to go," Leigh said. She liked the exact spot she was in.

Ahmet pulled her with his eyes. "She will be there tonight and next Wednesday. You must see her tonight."

"C'mon, Leigh, we might be gone by Wednesday," said Nicole, and Leigh easily agreed.

Nicole volunteered to drive Helmut's little car to the bar and to her surprise, he let her. She jumped into the driver's seat, and Leigh popped happily into the back seat with Ahmet.

"It's okay, I've been driving standards since I was twelve years old." She started the car and said, "*Calisse*, the clutch is really stiff."

They headed out of Goreme to the village of Urgup, twenty minutes to the east. The cobblestone road out of Goreme went straight up and around and around like a very bumpy spiral staircase. It was not lit. Nicole expertly changed gears and climbed the hill, earning Helmut's approval. Squinting to see in the dark, she started to fly downhill catching up to a truck ahead.

She touched the brakes with plenty of time to spare. Nothing happened.

“There are no brakes!” she shrieked.

“Yes, yes! Push hard!” yelled Helmut.

They watched the back end of the truck getting larger and larger as Nicole pushed the brake pedal with all her strength. The car slowed, but not fast enough, and she drove it off the road to avoid hitting the truck. It banged to a stop, shaking everyone in the car. Laughing hysterically, Nicole drove along in the ditch. The headlights were too weak to be of much help, and the front right tire hit a large rock. As Nicole forced the wheel up and over, Leigh slid into Ahmet and then bounced hard onto the floor. She picked herself up as Nicole managed to get the car back up onto the road.

The roads wound crazily through the weird moon-scape in the dark. Nicole followed them blithely, like a toddler with no sense of danger, playing with the car all the way. By the time they got to the Cave Bar, their sides were sore from laughing.

The dark parking lot settled them, and the women linked arms. They walked behind the men, letting themselves be led to a large rock with a door.

The Cave Bar was the oddest bar Leigh had ever seen. It truly was a cave. The floor, walls and rounded ceiling were all rough rock, carved two thousand years ago. A mess of wires lined the ceiling and provided the eerie place with the black light of a disco. It was early, and the bar was almost empty. The Eagles blared from large hanging speakers. They chose a low table by the stone fireplace and ordered drinks. Ahmet and Helmut ordered beer.

“So much for Muslims not drinking alcohol,” Leigh said under the music to Nicole.

Nicole’s blue eyes were big. She leaned forward in her chair looking for action. Leigh settled back with her drink, tired of talking now. Ahmet amused them by performing coin tricks. He pulled money from Leigh’s ear, giving her a thrill as he touched her hair. He snatched coins from Nicole’s hand before she could close it. The bar began to fill.

Ahmet stood and came to Leigh’s chair. He bowed low and held out one hand. “Will you dance with me?”

He looked like a knight or a prince...no, not a prince, more like the honourable third son of a peasant come to kill my giant, thought Leigh. She gravely took his hand and stood. He held her hand high between them as they went through a rough stone archway into the next cave room.

The music was slow, and no one else was on the dance floor. Ahmet stood two feet away from Leigh and held out one stiff arm. His palm was flat. She reached for his hand and held it lightly. The hand did not curl onto her own but remained flat and trembling.

Leigh’s short dress, red with small white flowers, bought on a street in Florence, hugged her tiny torso and flared at the hips, giving an illusion of shapeliness. They stayed on the dance floor a long time, talking softly and moving closer together. Leigh’s little dress was the only colour: a slice of red against the dark shape of Ahmet, dancing formally in a dim hole in a rock.

A few beers and a few hours later, Leigh and Ahmet were alone and kissing in an adjoining alcove. Ahmet’s hands were on her small breasts; she was reaching for

his round behind. His dark blue jean shirt was worn soft, and she pushed her face into it. She found a little place under his ear and bit his neck.

Ahmet wrestled her face out of his chest and neck to kiss her ferociously. His kisses were hungry mouthfuls, and his hands seemed to be everywhere at once. He touched her neck with assurance, knowing where to make his requests. He grabbed her body in handfuls. Every time he slid his hand up her thigh, she pulled it back from under her skirt. As soon as she let go of his hand, he would slide it up her thigh again. He was rough and sure and persuasive. Leigh felt desirable, and she liked his urgency.

"I better go see what Nicole is doing," she said, finally breaking away.

"No, no, she is fine," Ahmet, pulling her back.

"No, really." Leigh broke away to wander down some low passages in the rock. Each room was lower-ceilinged than the one before. Going through the passageways she had to duck, her back at a sixty-degree angle. She found Nicole surrounded by four or five men seated in a small alcove on the bend of a passageway.

"Leigh, Leigh, my frien'. What the hell'er ya doin'?"

She laughed, "I'm being eaten alive! It's pretty hot."

Nicole raised an eyebrow and wriggled it at her.

"Are you drunk Nicole?"

"Lissen. I got a job!"

"What?" Leigh straightened and smacked her head on rock. "Shit!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm gonna work here."

"Are you serious?" Leigh held her hand against her throbbing head. "When?"

Nicole waved her hand. "Every night startin' sometime."

Leigh left, rubbing her head and muttering about claustrophobia and places to die.

The bar was full of Turkish men. Leigh saw only one Turkish woman, and she wasn't wearing a head scarf like the other local women she'd seen. The few other women present were obviously tourists. They were surrounded by clumps of men. Leigh worked her way through rooms leading to rooms until she was back at an alcove off the dance floor, where Ahmet was waiting for her.

Ahmet was more interested in kissing than dancing, but watching the action over his shoulder was part of the turn-on for Leigh. Turkish pop music had replaced thin tapes from the seventies, and the dancing was spectacular. The men danced together in pairs and groups. Accomplished dancers, they shook their shoulders, brought their bodies low to the floor and moved their feet in intricate steps. Leigh had never seen anything like the way they danced together. They hooked their knees around each other's legs and pulsed their pelvises. It made sense because there were few women to dance with, but Leigh found it strangely intense in the dark smoky cave.

At midnight, the music whined and enticed a belly dancer out under the coloured lights. She had long dark hair and a costume like a princess from *Arabian Nights*. Sheer pink scarves and gaudy sequins emphasized her plump breasts and huge buttocks. Her stomach was flabby and hung over her low spangled bikini. The men hooted their appreciation.

She danced fluidly, using veils to cover and then reveal her face, her stomach and her cleavage. Her stomach shook wildly to the music. Men crept up to tuck money in her costume. She lay on a carpet on the floor and balanced a sword on her undulating stomach. She transferred the sword to her hip without using her hands, and then placed it spinning on top of her head as she stood. The dark men crowded close, heatedly urging her on. They clapped their hands to the music and some sang.

Leigh crouched against the stone wall with Ahmet's arm hooked in hers. She looked beyond him to the scene in the cave and found Nicole's eyes across the smoke-filled room. Nicole motioned negatively to Helmut who seemed to be trying to get closer.

"Okay," signed Leigh, "we'll go soon."

When the four of them finally spilled out the door, they were almost on top of a fight between two sweating panting men who circled each other and spat words. Leigh jumped out of the way; Ahmet's hand pulled her back and around the crowd. Leigh's other hand tightly held one of Nicole's fingers as she lurched along behind them. Ahmet told them the fight was over a woman. Each man said she was his.

"What does the woman say?" asked Leigh.

"She's a tourist, inside," said Ahmet, shrugging. "She doesn't know."

The larger of the two men jumped the other and pulled him down to the ground. Leigh cringed and turned away, feeling a little sick. She could still hear the punches land, and she ran out into the parking lot to get away from it. It was cold, and they were soon

all in the car, Nicole assigned to the passenger seat up front, as Helmut was not quite as drunk.

Helmut gleefully called it "nightdriving." The bright-green car raced after pedestrians, no matter what side of the road they were on, causing them to leap out of the way. Helmut drove right up onto a sidewalk following one fast-moving guy. He raced up to the back of a truck, so close they could have reached out with their hands and touched it. Leigh and Ahmet rolled around the backseat, laughing. They were thrown from one end of the seat to the other as Helmut pulled the steering wheel sharply back and forth.

"Don't puke Nicole," called Leigh.

"Don't worry, I'm true *Quebecoise*."

Once in front of the women's pension, Ahmet convinced Leigh to go for a short walk for a goodnight kiss.

"Don't be long," said Nicole, eyeing Helmut.

"Promise," said Leigh, and she and Ahmet started down a dirt path.

It was pitch black at their feet. They lightly touched hands as they walked carefully over the uneven ground. The black silhouette of the rock formations made a paper cut-out against the charcoal sky. They tripped toward one tower of rock and sat below it in the dirt. They were comfortable together; they talked quiet end-of-the-night talk, leaning back against the rock tree trunk.

Ahmet placed his hand under her chin and turned her face to meet his eyes. He kissed her gently.

"You are a beautiful man," she said.

He laughed softly.

Ahmet seemed to have ten hands as he touched

Leigh exactly where and how she wanted to be touched. They slid horizontal as their bodies moved together, feeling promising sensations. She looked beyond his shoulder at the black shapes against the starry sky. A star near the shining edge of the moon made her think of Turkey's red flag with a white crescent moon and single star.

"Look! The Big Dipper!" How could the Big Dipper, so familiar to her, be here, in this place, where every sight, smell and sound was unfamiliar?

Leigh forced herself to sit. She pushed his hands away and smoothed her dress.

"Do you know the Big Dipper is really a bear?" she asked him, pointing out the constellation. "See there? The handle of the Big Dipper is the tail of the bear. Bear is really big. The pot is along his back. See the legs down there?"

"Is it a story?" he asked. "Tell me about bear."

"No, we don't have time," said Leigh. "Let's go." She stood and pulled him up. "We can't leave Nicole with that guy."

Ahmet let himself be pulled. "It is truth," he said.

As they found their way through the blackness at their feet, Leigh told him that she knew lots of good stories, and that sometimes, she made stories up.