

STOLEN HISTORIES: Return to Turkey

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Stolen Histories: Return to Turkey

By Diane J Duca

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PROLOGUE

Corpses littered the road – frozen, faceless men. Some may have had a small spark of life but no one cared, no one dared to stop or he too would freeze to death. Feet crunched on the mud road stiffened with ice that made walking akin to stepping on a bed of broken glass. Some lucky men still wore boots but with gaping holes in the soles which they attempted to smother with scraps of old newspapers. Other ingenious soldiers had torn the leaves from rotting cabbages found in the fields and stuffed those into the bottom of their boots. There were no replacements; the supply trucks were far behind and sunk up to their axles in frozen mud. All the horses had collapsed in exhaustion from the forced march, biting wind and bitter cold. Commander Enver Pasha rode up and down his ranks on a tired old donkey confiscated from the last farm they'd passed. The men pushed onward, receiving no mercy from their determined commander.

Enver Pasha led a coup against the Turkish government and after claiming absolute power, gathered recruits for an army. He promised a victory that would breathe new life to the declining Ottoman Empire.

It was December 1914, and the ill-prepared Turkish troops were led into the South Caucasus Mountains to engage a better equipped and more disciplined Russian army. Enver was desperate to stave off the Russians from occupying more of Anatolia. They retreated to Van, regrouped, then proceeded to Doğubayazıt attempting to contain their advancing foe.

The Russians had pushed their way toward Doğubayazıt. They too suffered losses in the thousands during their long march, yet still outnumbered the Ottomans two to one. Their objective was to rout whatever Ottoman troops remained in the area and then headquarter in the İshak Paşa Palace. The 18th century palace was a perfect stronghold

to control the area and it was not unknown to the Russians as they had previously occupied the Palace in 1828.

The Russian troops set up camp five kilometers from Doğubayazit to tend their wounded and scout the strength of their opponent. For over two weeks, the Russians stoked a multitude of campfires strategically placed so they appeared to circle the town. The fires lit up the night. The Turks believed what they saw, thinking the number of Russians far greater than it was. The Russian subterfuge worked. By the twelfth day the Turks began deserting.

On the fifteenth day under the cover of night and leaving the campfires burning, the Russians crept into town. They moved silently from street to street with no resistance, but upon reaching the town center they realized the Turks had been alerted. The Turkish soldiers had built a defensive barricade using overturned tables, chairs stacked on top discarded stuffed sofas, and bundles of hay. A line of rifles peered over the pile of odd-lots designed to keep the advancing Russians at bay. As their enemy approached, a machine gun strategically placed in a second story window of the town hall clattered and mowed down the front line of Russians. But the Russians pushed forward before the Turk's smoking machine gun could be reset. Now the armies engaged in hand-to-hand combat – rifle shots reverberated; bayonets took their marks. Copious amounts of blood were spilled and soaked the crusty dirt street.

Over the next three years, the Russians occupied the İshak Paşa Palace. By 1917, the Tsarist regime in Russia was breaking apart and supporting the Russian troops in Eastern Anatolia was not a priority. Accordingly, the Russians were recalled to their Mother Land. In their wake they left a badly damaged palace. They looted books from its library, stole whatever art they could carry, and most regrettably tore down its ornamental gold-plated gateway, the *Portal of Harem*. The stolen objects eventually found their way to museums in Moscow and

St. Petersburg. Today the magnificent *Portal of Harem* is said to reside in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum.

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

August 10 - Washington DC

2:00 p.m.

“Richard, what in the hell are you thinking? You want to put a civilian in place in Turkey? That’s the answer you’ve come up with?” Berny’s face flushed red, he was aghast and totally dumbfounded. They were trying to chase down an antiquities smuggling cartel thought to be operating out of Turkey, but their bureaucratic superiors had yet to approve the budget for a field operation.

“Now hold on a minute ole buddy. I’ve thought this through and it seems like a perfect solution,” Richard said reasonably.

“Yeah, right! You’re talking about someone unqualified – no field experience, not even remotely. You want to ask an elderly woman, no less, to volunteer her time in a dangerous environment? All other stupidities aside, would she even have the stamina?”

“Too late,” Richard said, “I already called her.” Although, to himself he wondered whether he had been too impulsive.

Berny slumped in his chair, feeling defeated. He knew from experience, having served over twenty years in the Navy with Richard, that the man could be most obstinate. “All right, I give up. You figure this out; this is all on you. By the way, what did you disclose to our old professor about our case?”

“Uh, nothing really, she didn’t answer the phone. I just left a message saying that I was working on a project about Turkey that might interest her – something like that.” Richard mumbled and turned away, suddenly the papers on his desk needed straightening.

“Seriously? You didn’t even talk to her? Did you forget our conversation about that Interpol idiot who went poking around Eastern

Turkey? He got in serious trouble while trying to expose that smuggling cartel. And you are thinking of involving Dr. Dee?" Berny was appalled.

"That was a year ago and he wasn't investigating our case. Think about it Berny. A little old lady is not likely to raise suspicion. Besides which, she's just as likely to whack someone over the head with her umbrella as she is to give them a big hug. Dr. Dee could snoop around without raising any alarms, something that lout from Interpol couldn't seem to manage. That's why he got shot," Richard said, rationalizing.

"I suggest you get your butt out to Washington pronto. Assess Dr. Dee in person then pop the question. But you'd better not get caught referring to her as a little old lady. Oh, and Richard, you need to get your head on straight and be a bit more truthful!"

"Want to come with me, be my wingman?" Richard said wiggling his eyebrows.

Berny laughed, shaking his head. "In your dreams buddy. You know I don't agree with your choice for this situation but, he added reluctantly, you can count on my support if needed."

CHAPTER 2

August 11 - Edmonds, Washington
10:30 a.m.

Dink was meandering aimlessly in her garden when Richard had called. She ignored the phone. It was probably another stupid robocall about cemetery plots, hearing aids, or a Life Line bracelet – whatever the hell that was. Ever since marketing gurus pegged her as a senior citizen those annoying solicitations had begun, as if she were suddenly physically challenged and had one foot in the grave. Twenty minutes later when her espresso needed a refill, Dink went indoors and noticed the blinking red light on her answering machine. “Hmm, looks like a real person may have left a message.” Having lived alone for the past two decades, talking to herself had become a habit; she made no apologies for that.

Dink didn’t waste time returning Richard’s call - curiosity was one of her strong suits. She recognized the area code as Washington D.C. and wondered if Richard was still in the Navy. She felt uncharacteristically jittery about making the call; the man gave her butterflies. He was a charmer, but married and at least a decade younger than she. Nonetheless, Richard was her favorite companion on several group tours. She sighed deeply – such fond memories.

“Hello, I’m calling for Richard McNarry.”

A curt receptionist asked, “What is your name? What agency are you with? Please state the nature of your business.”

“My name is Dr. Deelinger.” Annoyed, Dink emphasized the doctor. “I am returning Richard’s call. It’s personal!” Under her breath she mumbled, “That should give her something to chew on.” Dink disliked gatekeepers and preferred those days when people answered

their own phone. Besides, she had no idea what agency she was calling since Richard didn't say.

"Richard McNarry, how can I help you?"

"Richard, it's Dr. Dee returning your call. Your receptionist, or whoever, wanted to know my business so I told her it was personal. I was being discreet, thought I would save you the embarrassment of telling her it's one of your old girlfriends."

Laughing loudly, Richard said, "Well done Dr. Dee and it's good to hear you haven't changed a bit. It's been what, twenty years?"

"Something like that but don't remind me, that makes me an old lady. What in heaven's name are you up to these days? You were grossly vague. And drop the Dr. Dee. I'm not grading you anymore. Just call me Dink."

"Dink? Where did that come from? You're not going to tell me? Okay, Dink it is. Or should I say Dr. Dink?"

"Richard shut up! Just tell me what you want."

"Sorry, I could have been more specific when I called but was reluctant to say too much on voice mail. Besides I couldn't be sure that I had the right number."

"That sounds rather mysterious, actually somewhat ominous. Hope you're not in any trouble, not that I could help, so..."

"No, no trouble. First, I should explain that I work for a special branch of HSI, Homeland Security Investigations. You reached me at SAC, the Special Agent in Charge Office. Ours is one of more than twenty-five SACs throughout the U.S. and I am assigned to its Cultural Property Art & Antiquities Smuggling Program."

Dink interrupted, "How long have you been with HSI? When did you retire from the Navy? How did you get involved with this Cultural Property Program? I've never heard of it. That's quite a departure from flying transports for the Navy. Do you miss flying?"

“Whoa, you pack a lot of questions! The short answer is that I’ve been with HSI for over ten years. I started in 2006, two years after I retired from the Navy. Yes, I miss flying but my mission with the Navy had become nearly obsolete, so after twenty years it was a good time to leave. I spent the next few years at odd jobs trying to figure out what to do next. I was in Boston for my daughter’s wedding and...”

“Wait a minute, your daughter is married? I remember meeting her at the pool on base in Ankara. She couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old!”

“Oh yeah, time flies,” he said using the trite yet appropriate expression. “Elise went to Boston College then graduate school at MIT where she met her now husband. When in Boston I ran into Berny Hill. Remember him? A great guy, and he claims he was also one of your students.”

“Ahh yes, Berny.” Dink winced thinking back to the black eye Berny once inflicted on her during a game of racket ball on the base at Ankara. Although to be fair, she missed her shot and was slow to duck.

“Berny was working at HSI and told me about its SAC Cultural Property investigations. He said it was interesting and fulfilling work. I’ve been here ever since. It was a good move. We help in the recovery of nations’ looted artifacts, art work, or objects of cultural heritage.”

“You mentioned Turkey when you called. Why? What does that have to do with me?”

“Um,” Richard hemmed and hawed, searching for the best way to tell Dink what he really wanted. “Because Turkey is the cradle of many of the world’s earliest civilizations, that has made it a magnet, attracting thieves of cultural antiquities.”

What? He called to share that? Dink put the phone on speaker and started emptying her dishwasher, waiting for him to get to the point. Then his comment hit her and she remarked, “Wow, I can see the temptation! I remember walking alone around the ruins of the Hittite’s

ancient capital city of Hattuşaş. Giant clay pots and pieces of tiles protruded from the dirt inside its crumbling temple complex. I was amazed that I could simply walk over, touch the artifacts and no one yelled at me. But that was a long time ago and I never gave a thought about its preservation or protection.”

Richard smiled, he’d gotten Dink to relive her appreciation of Turkey’s ancient history. “And for your information,” he continued, “all the important artifacts from Hattuşaş are now safely housed in the Museum of Anatolian Civilization in Ankara, or the smaller Çorum Museum operating within Hattuşaş National Park.”

Dink was mildly intrigued but still not getting why Richard called. He could be so obtuse.

“I tell you what. We have a SAC office in Seattle. I have been meaning to meet with them on another case,” Richard fibbed. “If you are free one day next week, I could visit you and explain the Turkish dilemma in detail.” She didn’t need to know the only purpose of his trip out west would be to snare her involvement.

“All right. I’m working part-time but I can juggle my schedule to meet at your convenience. Why don’t we make it a luncheon? I can whip up something light; we can eat out on my patio. The weather is perfect, we’ve none of that hot sticky DC humidity here.”

“Great, sounds like a plan. I’ll probably arrive on Monday and call mid- week. Thanks Dink and I look forward to seeing you again.” Richard sighed deeply when he hung up, reminding himself that he needed to go easy.

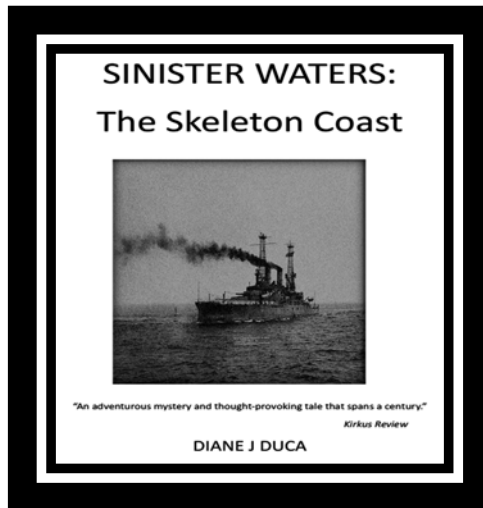
That was strange, Dink thought as she hung up. “Guess I could do a little research on artifact smuggling in the meantime,” she said to Spooky, one of her three cats who was rubbing circles around her ankles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Duca has traveled out of country since childhood; her wanderlust has continued into her senior years with visits to over eighty countries. Now semi-retired, she works part-time for a social services organization and her school district. Her advanced degrees are from the University of Colorado. Dr. Duca has published two books on management, written for newspapers, and published in national magazines. This is her second novel and a third is in the works. She lives in Washington state with her two rescue cats.

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Read on for another adventure mystery featuring “Dink”.



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