THE SYRIAN PIETA

Chapter One

Ahdaf dropped a coin in the tip bowl and left the hammam. The hectic street quickly robbed him of the languidness he had enjoyed stretched out on a hot marble slab. He dodged pushcarts and deliverymen, some shirtless in the warming day, and jumped out of the way every time a boy, clinging to the back of a wagon piled high with boxes, shouted warnings as he hurtled down the hill with nothing more to brake him than his heels in thin sandals.

It wasn't any less chaotic inside Leyla's Café. People—mostly dark men with some amount of facial hair—sat around small tables, their voices raised competing to be heard, arms flailing the air as they acted out whatever they were saying. A tobacco cloud hung overhead, abetted by the men puffing on *shishas* that sent up drifts of sweet, tangy smoke.

Ahdaf squeezed between tables and outstretched legs to reach the stubby bar, stuck in a corner with three stools predictably empty, and littered with phones plugged into power strips Leyla had recently put out ostensibly for refugees to recharge their phones, though it hadn't hurt her business, either. Only one socket was available, and Ahdaf snatched it before someone else could claim it. His charge was in the red zone, down to a suicidal four percent given that his own life depended on his battery's life.

"You coming from the hammam?" Leyla asked.

"How can you tell?"

"You smell like soap."

"Is that good?"

"It's better than you smelled yesterday."

"Was it bad?"

"You're not wearing your usual blue shirt, either."

"I washed it. This is my back-up."

A stranger pushed up to the bar. "Sounds like you could use a third shirt," he said. He was older than Ahdaf but not by much. He could've passed for Turkish but something about him said he wasn't.

"I only have two hangers," Ahdaf said, not looking at the man, not wanting to engage with him.

"Tea?" Leyla asked him.

"*Tea?*" She knew Ahdaf would want a beer. Then it dawned on him, maybe there was something amiss about the stranger and that was her signal. "Yeah, and with extra sugar," he said. "My body weight tells me I'm undernourished."

"That's an extra lira."

"Okay, no extra sugar. I don't want you getting rich off me."

Leyla laughed. "Get rich off you? I couldn't get rich off all you guys in here put together, no matter what I was selling!" She dropped a third cube into his glass. "On the house."

Ahdaf frowned as he stirred his tea. "We had jobs in Syria. I could've made you rich then."

The stranger offered his hand. "I'm Selim Wilson. Sam if you prefer."

"I'm Ahdaf. Why would I prefer Sam?"

Selim shrugged. "It's what I was called growing up."

"You changed it to Selim?"

“My mother’s Turkish. Selim is on my birth certificate.”

“While you guys decide on what’s his name, I’ve got other customers,” Leyla said.

“Before you go, do you have cold beer?” Selim asked.

She looked at Ahdaf when she said, “Only one.”

“I only want one.”

“It’s mine,” Ahdaf spoke up.

“You’re drinking tea.”

He took a last sip and pushed the cup aside. “I’m finished, and I ordered the beer. Especially cold.”

“I tell you what, you guys share it.” Leyla uncapped the bottle and planted it between them, along with two glasses, and squeezed around the end of the stubby bar to serve tables.

“It’s all yours, if you want it,” Selim said.

“Let’s share it.”

“Then it’s my treat.” As he poured, Selim angled the glasses to produce only a thin head of foam. “Cheers,” he said, as he passed one to Ahdaf.

Ahdaf took a sip. “Are you American?” he asked.

“Is my accent that bad?”

“It’s an accent. I like to know where people are from.”

“It’s American,” Selim confirmed.

As they drank more beer, they glimpsed themselves in the mirror behind shelves of glasses, which distorted them and also warped the many overlapping pictures of Hollywood cowboys that Leyla had glued like wallpaper around the bar. Selim, tilting to one side, said, “If

you move the right way, it looks like you're in the same picture with these guys. At the same table or even on the same horse!"

"You've been here before?" Ahdaf asked.

"Occasionally."

"I've never seen you here and it's my office."

"Obviously we work different hours."

"I've never seen another American in here."

"I'm Turkish American. Maybe that explains it."

"I've never seen you."

"I know, and that's why I'm here. I wanted to meet you."

Ahdaf's internal alarm went off. He'd met lots of strangers at Leyla's; they were his business and Leyla's was his meeting place. Selim was somehow different. "Why's that?" he asked.

"I've heard you get things done."

"What things?"

"Moving people."

"Who told you?"

"A lot of people could have told me."

"But who did? I like to know how people find me."

"He. She. It. I don't remember."

"Why the secrecy?"

"Because I want to set up a reliable route for people to escape."

"Escape what?"

"Turkey."

"So you're a smuggler, like me?" Ahdaf, his heart racing, feared he was entering a danger zone.

"Not like you, or why would I need you?"

"Sorry, but I came to Istanbul to be safe." Ahdaf checked his phone. "It's charged enough," he reported, and slipped it into his shoulder pack. "Are you CIA?"

"I can't say who I work for. Not until we have an agreement."

"Then I guess I'll never know. Thanks for the beer." He slipped off the barstool.

"Just remember, Ahdaf Jalil—"

"How do you know my name?"

"What you call 'moving people' is trafficking to the rest of the world. Turkey could deport you, or send you back to Raqqa. Back to ISIS."

"I didn't come looking for you. Fucking leave me alone."

"Take this." Selim forced a business card on him.

"I don't want it."

"You might need help. Not everyone is a nice guy like you."

Ahdaf glanced at the card. No name. Only a telephone number with a local prefix. "It's your number?"

"Not exactly."

"Do I ask for Sam or Selim?"

"You don't ask for anyone. You leave your name and a message, and where to find you if you need help."

“I won’t need help,” Ahdaf said, but stuck the card in his pocket anyway. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Next time I’ll buy you a meal.”

Ahdaf made his way to the door of the lively café. He knew some eyes trailed him. Nobody’s business was entirely private since most of it was conducted on the street. Everybody kept an eye on each other, and not always to be helpful. Selim hadn’t said he was CIA, but he was somebody like that, and probably somebody in that café knew exactly who he was.

The door hadn’t closed behind him before his phone started ringing.

###

An hour later, Ahdaf was pacing the loading dock at the central bus station. The family was late. Nothing had been easy to arrange for them because they insisted on traveling all together, not letting the father go first and establish a beachhead where the others could join him. For Ahdaf, that meant more seats on a bus, more lifejackets, more spaces on a raft—all of which were in heavy demand. It was mid-autumn, and already on some days the weather made it treacherous to cross. In another six weeks, it would be an option only for the very desperate.

Ahdaf had bribed the bus driver to save seats for the family. He tried to promise the same service to all his customers, and he pretty much could; he’d learned which drivers he could trust to actually save the seats until the door closed. If the family missed the bus, it would mean new tickets, a new bribe, and they would blame him for not holding the bus. Or at least most clients blamed him, though this family was especially nice. He was glad he could help them.

He checked his watch.

Ten minutes.

Ahdaf looked around. The driver wouldn't wait for anybody. Certainly the seat jumpers wouldn't. The instant the door hissed preparing to close, the passengers in the aisle would wrangle for the three vacant seats, claiming maladies they didn't have to assert their priority to sit down.

The driver blew the horn. Five-minute warning.

Ahdaf caught his eye through the windshield. They exchanged shrugs. Ahdaf didn't know where the family was and the driver was waiting for nobody.

Then there they were, joggling along the platform looking for the bus to Assos, rushed and encumbered; an infant in her mother's arms, the father and teenage son hauling rucksacks.

"Here!" Ahdaf waved to catch their attention. "HERE! HERE!"

They hurried up to him.

He chuckled when he saw Nadia's inflated belly. "You weren't so big yesterday," he said.

"You told us to make her look more pregnant," Yusuf, her husband, reminded him.

"And you sure did!"

Two toots on the horn. The two-minute warning.

"Call the number I gave you as soon as you get off the bus. Your contact will be waiting for you."

"Who is it?" Yusuf asked.

"I never know. You have a backup number if there's a problem. And if there's still a problem, call me. Here, take these." Ahdaf gave them bright pink caps with sun visors. He even had one for the baby.

Issa, the fourteen-year-old with a wispy moustache, looked askance. “I’m supposed to wear a pink hat?”

“It’s the only color they had. Besides, you won’t care when you get to Lesvos and have to walk seventy kilometers in the hot sun.”

Nadia paled. “We have to walk seventy kilometers? I really am pregnant.”

She looked at her husband, who said, “I’ll carry you if I have to.”

Issa put the cap on backwards, having to really pull it hard over his mop of curly black hair. “It’s too tight!”

“Tight’s good. You won’t lose it if there’s wind.”

“Wait,” the teenager said, and turned the cap around to pull some hair through the band in the back. “Cool or uncool?” he asked Ahdaf.

“Cool. It’ll never fall off.” Ahdaf caught the driver’s eye again, who nodded. Time to board.

“Thank you again, Ahdaf,” Nadia said, and did an unexpected thing for a Syrian woman: she kissed him on his cheek. “You are a kind man to help my family.”

“You helped save my family’s life,” Yusuf added.

“I’ve only helped a little. It’s you who saved your family, Yusuf. You escaped the war. I’ve only helped a little.”

“*Inshallah*.”

They shook hands and touched their hearts, and Yusuf followed his wife onto the bus.

Issa, the last to board, pointed to his cap.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

"*Pink?*"

"You'll be glad to have it, pink or not, and besides, you might start a trend."

The boy grinned. "Cool. Thanks for helping my family."

They shook hands, and Issa bounded up the steps and sat across the aisle from his parents in the front row. As they all waved goodbye, the driver stared at Nadia's pronounced belly. He glanced in the rear view mirror to ask the passengers, "Is there a midwife on the bus?"

Ahdaf heard a few nervous laughs as the door hissed and closed. The bus driver backed out of the bay and drove off. Ahdaf waved again though he couldn't see the family through the glazed windows; but perhaps they saw him, and he knew how every act of kindness, no matter how trivial—if only the offer of a piece of sesame bar—could nurture someone's hope that what lay ahead mightn't be so bad.

He left the bus terminal and ran to catch the tram when he saw it pulling up. It wasn't full and he sat by the window watching shopkeepers in the last throes of the day: dragging merchandise inside, flicking off lights and lowering noisy metal grates. Only the cafés had customers. Ahdaf felt deflated—how else to describe it?—whenever he sent people he'd grown to like into unknown hands and an uncertain future. He had learned it was possible to bond with other refugees very quickly because that's all the time they had. The family, too, had felt the bittersweetness of the moment. Nadia's kiss on his cheek was so telling of that. It made Ahdaf smile, thinking she probably wished she had made herself appear a little less pregnant to have more room on the narrow bus seat, but the ploy might win her some sympathy if she needed protection or a helping hand. The family's journey had already been tough. Ahdaf had made the same one, coming from Syria mostly on foot and braving scoundrels along the way. But unlike

Yusuf's family, he opted to stay in Istanbul. He felt safe enough there, and anonymous when he wanted to be.

Or was he? How did the CIA man—that's how he thought of Selim even if he hadn't admitted that he was—know so much about him? He even knew his last name; but then Ahdaf realized, half the people at Leyla's could have told him. It was odd, though, if he'd come around asking questions about Ahdaf, that no one mentioned it. On things like that, someone always had your back because they wanted the same protection.

Like many of the young guys who hung out at the café, Ahdaf played a minor role in a big racket. He moved people arriving in Istanbul to Assos, a sleepy town on the coast, from where they'd cross the narrow channel to Greece. He organized bus connections, space on rafts with lifejackets, overnight stays if needed, special needs (replacements for lost crutches in at least a dozen cases), and always the important instructions for his clients' onward journey. He wasn't much more than a gofer. All the young smugglers who hung out in Leyla's were gofers, not the racketeers. That distinction belonged to the smuggling networks' bosses who paid the bribes and bought the rafts, not the minions who filled them with desperate passengers. Ahdaf had no idea who the bosses were. It wasn't like there was a corporate headquarters somewhere he could visit and meet the team. It was managed by cell phone, and only in-person when money needed to be exchanged or a gofer disciplined. That didn't mean that he didn't hear the abusive stories from up and down the line; the worst, in his mind, money paid for services never provided—in effect stolen, and it was a life changer for refugees to have to come up with that money again. People counted on it to buy them a few weeks to straighten out their new lives wherever they eventually landed. Their future had been stolen from them; or at least, the start of it. But the abusive stories weren't about Ahdaf. Of that he could be sure, but he couldn't stop the

others, either. He survived in an edgy world, which translated meant easily dangerous verging on lethal. He couldn't risk trying to stop them.

"Next station Aksaray," a recorded voice over the tram's intercom announced. "Aksaray. Next station Aksaray."

Most people got off, and Ahdaf followed them. It was a popular neighborhood, meaning working class, and a magnet for refugees, too. Families sat in clumps on the sidewalks, some ever-alert to begging opportunities but the majority just huddled in what little space they could find. For most, living on the streets was a desperate adjustment after losing their claim to middle class. Many of them could have been Ahdaf's mother, an English teacher, or his father, a dentist, because they too had been teachers and dentists, or simply housewives who'd been enjoying modern luxuries like dishwashers until their neighborhoods were bombed. They had fled, none under Ahdaf's special circumstances, but for reasons also threatening enough to uproot themselves and embark on a dangerous journey. Not everyone survived and they knew that when they started out, but their odds were worse if they remained behind.

Ahdaf resented the whole vocabulary of human trafficking, and Selim had almost called him a trafficker. He didn't traffic people. He smuggled people because they wanted to be smuggled. Along a long chain, he moved them one link. If they could have done it themselves, they would have, but they needed help and he didn't exploit them. The guys running the rackets made the money, which he always collected, but with his meager cut he barely got by. It was only enough to keep him working for them. He was a foot soldier in an ever-growing army. People who'd already passed through sometimes sent word back to refugees following them to seek Ahdaf out. At least for one leg of their journey, they could be sure someone wasn't going to

steal their money. They'd feel safe because safety was what Ahdaf had sought for himself. He would never buy an oligarch's palace on the Bosporus, so why not stay an honest man?

Out of habit, his feet brought him to Leyla's Café when he'd been intending to go home. Once there, he thought he might as well go inside, but then he took a look through the window at the bedraggled men slouched on the chairs, hanging out because they had no other place to go. It depressed him because he was one of them with no place to go; certainly no place he wanted to call home, and he'd be going home to no one. He didn't want to be depressed after he'd been feeling good about himself for helping the family. He'd saved their lives, the father said, though Ahdaf knew it was an exaggeration. He also knew that the road ahead of them was still treacherous. He smiled remembering the fourteen-year-old boy's worry about being uncool. Ahdaf, only ten years older, could remember being fourteen. Before the war. Before turning fifteen, or any age, became chancy. He may not have saved their lives, but he was glad if he'd given the boy a better shot at reaching fifteen.

He caught Leyla's eye through the window. She looked puzzled, and he realized he'd been standing there lost in thought for a couple of minutes. With a short wave, he walked off, and five minutes later he was on his backstreet pushing his way through a heavy door. He climbed one flight of steps, which was the only thing he liked about his room: it wasn't on the ground floor.

He flipped on the light and looked for fleeing cockroaches. It had been a week since Ahdaf had seen one. He appeared to be winning that war. He dropped his daypack on the floor and went into the bathroom. At least he had a proper toilet to piss into and didn't have to use the sink, though he didn't have a shower or tub and could only splash himself clean. But it was a far cry from when he first arrived in Istanbul and shared a basement room with nine other guys

flopped out, someone always smoking, or farting while pissing in the sink. They didn't have a toilet, and for shitting, they had to do it somewhere else. He never knew ten confined men could be so rank. He'd wake up smelling like them. Sometimes it stayed on him all day. That's what motivated him to splurge on a hammam as soon as he had an extra few lira to spend.

He pulled a beer from the refrigerator, popped its top and took a swallow. It was only as cold as tap water but that would do. Beer was Ahdaf's new habit. In Raqqa, it had been hard to find, and he hadn't drunk it more than a clandestine few times, usually when he and his cousin got tipsy enough to seduce each other—if their experimental touches could be called seduction. In Istanbul, it helped him sleep. It helped him nod off before bad memories or anxieties about his tenuous existence flooded him. He swallowed more beer. He was wired that night after being approached by the secretive American.

He stripped to his skivvies and turned off the light before crawling into bed. He finished the beer and set the bottle where he wouldn't accidentally knock it over. The evening was warm for mid-autumn. He threw off the sheet and laid back on the pillow waiting for the beer to dissolve the day.

It didn't. Instead he became aroused smelling the lingering soap on his body and remembering that part of his day at the hamam. Timur, the attendant he'd learned to ask for, had scrubbed him down, and as usual his hands, hidden under a mound of soapsuds, slipped up Ahdaf's thighs brushing his cock and making him hard. Timur gripped him, and with a couple of jerks made him come, the whole while acting with complete indifference, pretending not to notice he was touching him, even looking off when he could feel him coming. Only when he rinsed Ahdaf with cold water did his sly smile acknowledge their complicity. What Ahdaf also saw, not visible to anyone else, was Timur's cock wagging behind his thin towel. He wanted to

touch it—they both wanted him to touch it—but they also knew the danger of exposure as a homosexual. Now in bed, with no one to denounce him for his unholy thoughts, Ahdaf pulled off his undershorts, and with his eyes closed, imagined it was the attendant's cock that his hand closed on when he made himself come a second time that day.

He waited a minute, letting his satisfaction subside, before going into the bathroom to splash his belly clean.

###

Ahdaf stepped over the long bench to claim one of the spigots that ran the length of the wall. "*Salaam aleikum*," he said to the men seated next to him already washing their feet. He slipped off his sandals, turned on the spigot, and let the water run through his toes. As the call to prayer droned through overhead loudspeakers, most men along the bench kept their cleansing ritual confined to their feet and forearms, but some went through the full ablution of swishing water in their mouth, cleaning their ears, and snorting water out their nose.

He dried his feet with a handkerchief, and crossing barefoot to the mosque's entrance, left his sandals on a shelf. He slipped behind a heavy velvet curtain to enter the vast prayer hall encircled by five tiers of patterned stained glass windows rising to the dome. Except for worshippers kneeling on the expansive red carpet, it was bare; there was no furniture or architectural feature to break the eye's sweeping gaze. Man appeared inconsequential in the presence of Allah, which Ahdaf supposed was the architect's intent.

Ahdaf wasn't religious. He liked the notion of religion. He liked its superstitions and rituals; they were all for luck, health, or good fortune. The downside was that he believed very

little of Islam's tenets, especially after they had been used to justify his cousin's execution, which made it ironic that now Ahdaf used religion as part of his survival strategy. The mosque was the source of information and contacts, and Ahdaf relied on both.

That morning there was no imam. No sermon. The few dozen men who'd come to pray knelt in loose lines, bobbing out of synch to touch their foreheads to the ground while mumbling holy words. Ahdaf joined one of the lines, not exactly to pray, but to plead with his parents to manage to survive the civil war and beg his cousin's forgiveness if he had somehow contributed to his death. Those were his only prayers most mornings, but that day, he also thought about the family he put on the bus to Assos the night before, and prayed for them to be safe, too. When finished, he sat back on his haunches, eyes closed, enjoying a meditative minute before rousing himself to discover what the day was going to bring.

Outside, Ahdaf retrieved his sandals and dropped them on the ground to wiggle his feet into them. Someone said his name. He turned to Malik, the director of the mosque's madrasa, a wiry man with a prophet's beard and wearing a beige kaftan. "*Salaam aleikum*," they both said and touched their hearts.

"It is good to see you so often at prayers," Malik said. "It's apparent you are a man of faith."

"Sometimes habit can be mistaken for faith," Ahdaf replied. "My father insisted that I go to prayers once a day."

"It is not only habit in your case."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You still come to prayers even though your father is not here to scold you."

"Yes, it's true, though I wish he were. At prayers, I see many men who remind me of him. That's one reason I prefer to pray at the mosque, not in a shop or on the sidewalk. Also I'm alone in Istanbul. My father always spoke of the mosque not only as a place of faith, but of fellowship as well."

"Does that fellowship include drinking *khamr*?" Malik had used the Arabic word for all intoxicating drinks.

"*Khamr*?" Ahdaf asked.

"Beer."

In one word, Malik sent a seismic jolt through Ahdaf's world. Someone had seen him at Leyla's Café having a beer, and for some reason that was important enough to report it to him. Why Malik? And why was it important? As the madrasa's headmaster, he was certain to be a fundamentalist, but did he go so far as the *hisbeh*—the religious police—to spy on people? "It is rare that I drink a beer," he lied, feeling the need to defend himself.

"Beer is still *haram*," Malik said. Forbidden. "I am surprised a man with your strong faith would succumb to the temptation."

"Allah is forgiving," Ahdaf reminded him.

"The most forgiving," Malik replied, quoting verse.

"*Alhamdulillah*," they both said and touched their hearts. Thanks to Allah.

Ahdaf, wanting to end their exchange, smiled and took a step away. When Malik said his name again, it felt like a summons and he turned around. "Yes?"

"What did Selim Wilson want from you?"

Ahdaf gulped. "Selim Wilson?"

"He didn't tell you his name?"

"Yes, but how do you know it?"

"He is an American spy. What did he want?"

"He wants me to smuggle people."

"Who?"

"He didn't say."

"We want you to help him"

Ahdaf was baffled. "*Help* him?"

"We want to know what he's planning and who he is moving. If he wants information, what he's looking for? Anything you can tell us."

"Who are you?"

"Brothers in faith."

Ahdaf summoned the courage to ask, "Are you part of ISIS?"

"We help everyone who fights for Allah. Will you help us?"

"I'm not a spy," Ahdaf replied. "I told him that, too. I help move people. A lot of guys move people, same as me. You don't need me."

"Apparently Selim Wilson needs you. He picked you. He didn't buy anyone else a beer."

"I told him I wouldn't help him for the same reason I'm telling you no. I want to be away from war. I don't want to be part of a war here."

"Your faith makes you part of one. We are in a holy war, and not one that we started. The West has no religion except greed. Money, not faith, is its currency, and our oil is their money."

"I'm just trying to survive."

"Can you contact Selim Wilson?"

Ahdaf couldn't lie. Whoever had seen him sharing a beer with Selim would've seen the CIA man press his card on him. "Yes, I can contact him."

"Do it."

"I need to think about it."

"We have a sensitive operation coming up. Praise Allah."

"Praise Allah."

Again they touched their hearts. Before Ahdaf turned away, Malik added, "Don't take so long thinking about it that you accidentally fall off a building like your cousin."

Their eye contact held for an extra moment. Ahdaf willed his eyes to be expressionless. Malik's were confident.

Contempt was their common denominator.