

PART ONE

Chapter 1

They set off in the dark. Standing room only. The boat stank of rotten fish and the motor strained to push three hundred desperate souls through the sea. Water lapped over the sides as fear seeped out of everyone. Even in the black of night, Noor could see it in people's eyes and smell it in their sweat. Her daughter Huriye huddled against her.

‘We'll be safe in Europe, won't we Mama?’

Noor nodded. ‘War is behind us now, my love. Try to forget all about it.’

‘I wish Papa was with us.’

So did Noor. They'd hardly had a chance to mourn him. She kissed Huriye's forehead and held her tight.

Yesterday, their fixers in Izmir told them they were lucky as they took their fees. They said there would be a lull in the Poyroz wind which blew across the Aegean during the summer months, so the crossing would be easy. Then they herded everyone into trucks and drove to a remote cove on the south west tip of Turkey. They said theirs was a rarely used route to a Greek island and hardly ever patrolled by Frontex, the European border force. ‘Do not worry,’ they said. ‘You will all be on the shores of Rhodes in a couple of hours.’

Now that they were on open water, Noor believed they were finally on their way to resuming life - until the wind got up and the sea swelled. Each snarling wave pummelled their hopes a little more. Women wailed like forlorn animals. Children cried. Men argued to hide their panic. The guy in charge of the motor got a punch in the face and was nearly thrown overboard. His replacement didn't fare much better against the angry seas. Everyone swayed with the boat, a wobbly clinging mass of bodies staring at the sea like it was a hungry

beast. Those near the sides took turns to bail out water with plastic tubs and cut-off water bottles, not that it made much difference. They were ankle deep already.

Two men with long beards and cloth skullcaps hugged each other and prayed loudly. They seemed to have their life jackets on underneath their cotton tunics. They looked serene, almost as if they had accepted this journey would kill them. Others followed their example and soon a hypnotic murmuring underscored the wind and the waves.

Noor had never been devout so she didn't join in, she just pulled Huriye closer and whispered; 'We are nearly there my love.' And hoped her daughter wouldn't hear the strain in her voice.

'I want to learn French in a European high school,' said Huriye.

Noor managed a smile. It was good she thought about better things. Noor loved that Huriye had been able to keep her spirit during their flight. Kids are tough. They adapt. For Noor, the only way to get this far had been to lock part of her humanity in the depths of her mind after they'd murdered her husband. Before the war, she'd never considered that the will to survive fed on emotion and trauma; devoured them as fuel for mankind's primal instinct.

They pitched and rolled into the night, boiling in home-made life jackets and somehow they made it till dawn without sinking but Rhodes wasn't where it was supposed to be. Or maybe *they* weren't. A terrified silence thickened with the realisation that they were in open sea with no shelter or drinking water. Apparently, they didn't even have a compass. The only choice was to keep the boat pointed away from the rising sun and hope for land.

And then the motor spluttered and died. No more fuel.

The two men who'd started prayers during the night looked at the sky and began again. This time, few joined them. Most people just rocked back and forth slightly, unbalancing the boat. Stunned faces and glazed eyes. Hope slipping away. Noor wasn't sure

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if she'd rather be in a squalid camp in the desert or cowering in the rubble of a city than lost at sea.

She reached under her clothes and unzipped the pouch strapped to her stomach. Before they'd set off, Noor decided that she and Huriye would both keep phones so they could find each other if they got separated. The Izmir fixers had shown Noor how to keep the phones dry and useable by sealing them inside condoms or party balloons. Noor pulled hers out and turned it on but there was no signal so she put it away again.

Huriye pulled hers out excitedly.

'Now is not the time, my love. Don't waste your battery.'

'But it's for my video diary.'

Noor forced a grin. Only an eleven-year-old would see their flight as an adventure. Something to be chronicled and later shared on *YouTube* or social media. A few people groaned and complained when she panned the phone around the boat. Some covered their faces. 'Turn that off!'

She turned the camera to her mother and Noor managed to smile again.

'Mama, I need to pee.'

Somebody passed her a cut-off water bottle and everyone shuffled a bit to give her room to crouch. She stared at the bottle a moment, gave Noor her phone and lowered her jeans.

Suddenly, the air rumbled and everything shattered in a deafening bang. A shockwave thumped the boat and Noor felt her feet leaving the deck like in slow motion. A cold shock. Swallowed water. Tumbling, clawing, gripping. She clamped Huriye's wrist in one hand, her phone in the other. She looked up and saw flames and debris on the surface. Or maybe bodies, she couldn't tell.

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Her lungs bursting, Noor kicked to the surface with Huriye and turned her onto her back. There was burning wreckage and the water was thick and red and the metallic smell of blood invaded her nostrils. She stuffed Huriye's phone into her pouch and managed to grab a large piece of debris. She laid Huriye's head on the wood, pushed her hair back and saw a piece of metal protruding from her neck. Blood gushed and Noor went to remove the metal, but her medical training kicked in and stopped her. For the first time in her life, Noor wished she wore a hijab: she could have tried to use it as a dressing.

Noor spoke to Huriye, reassured her. How could she stop the blood loss? Noor tried to get her top off, but it was impossible without letting go of Huriye. All she could manage was to rip off a sleeve and press it to Huriye's wound. It was red seconds later.

Noor screamed until she gagged. Her guts knotted and twisted with a pain worse than she'd felt when they'd beheaded her husband. Her mind splashed in and out of oblivion, fugue state, unreality. Simply adrift. Surely, she'd wake up sweating in a moment? Her face was wet and salty, from tears or just the sea, she couldn't tell.

Something brushed off her foot. Were there sharks in the Aegean?

She heard a groan. Bloodied water splashed into her mouth. She checked Huriye's neck; lifted the dressing. The bleeding had stopped but her face was grey. All Noor's blood drained from her head and she gasped shallow, panicked breaths. Again, reality blurred, numbed.

Sometime later, Noor became vaguely aware of more groaning: mumbled words. A man floated into view and collided with her. His face was charred and a fingerless hand appeared and pawed. He kept moaning, blindly pawing.

He needed help, but Noor couldn't bring herself to release Huriye's body. She held her tight and shouted at him in Arabic then English. 'Try to grab me. Use both hands.'

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The man opened his eyes. ‘Please help me,’ he mumbled in English. ‘Don’t let me die here.’

‘Can you hold on to me?’ asked Noor.

She felt his fingerless hand push inside the belt of her lifejacket.

‘I don’t want to die here,’ he said.

Noor didn’t want to either, but they needed a miracle and she’d never really believed in those. The last eight years had taught her life was cruel and unfair, so why wouldn’t she die in the Aegean Sea like her daughter? Why was it Huriye instead of her? Noor had made this journey for her and now she... Noor kissed Huriye’s cheek and considered saying a prayer, but it seemed more pointless now than ever before. There was no God here. Noor rested her head on the wood and shut her eyes. Water splashed and the sun beat down. She imagined their small garden in Aleppo, her husband grilling meat while Huriye played in the evening sun.

Noor dreamt of a rhythmical, rumbling sound. It seemed to draw closer. She lifted her head and squinted. Water stung her eyes, clouding her vision. A dark form cast a shadow. Another heaving vessel making the same journey? It was bigger than the boat they had taken, its engine louder. She heard Arabic voices.

‘Down here! Help us!’ Hope pumped Noor’s heart, but she could only manage a whisper. ‘Please help us.’

There were shouts. Heads appeared, disappeared, reappeared. Something long was put over the side. A pole, or maybe a hook? It pointed down at Noor then moved over Huriye to the man clinging on.

‘We can’t grab your pole. It’s too high.’ Noor kissed Huriye’s cold cheek and tried to let her go but she couldn’t. So she let go of the wood instead and tried to reach for the pole.

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She could have sworn she heard laughing. Then she realised what they'd put over the side.

The barrel of a gun.

The first shot blew the man's head apart. Noor screamed as warm flesh splattered her face.

The barrel moved back to Huriye.

Noor covered Huriye's face with her hand. 'No, don't!'

The barrel moved to Noor. It wasn't the first time a gun had been pointed at her, maybe that's why she didn't panic. Instead, rage inflated her lungs. She roared at the heads on the boat, slapping the water with one hand. 'Go on then! Do it! I am not afraid.'

The boat bobbed about in the rolling seas but the barrel remained fixed on Noor. More heads appeared over the side. They were in discussion. Weighing up her life?

Something else appeared over the side and was lowered down. This time it was a grappling hook. Noor wrapped one arm round Huriye's waist and grabbed the hook with her other. The heads shouted things she couldn't understand. The hook shook and a shot rang out so she let go. They pushed it down, hitting her on the shoulder so she threaded her elbow through it again. More shouting, but she wouldn't let go. Eventually Noor and Huriye were hoisted out of the crimson water.

Noor lay shivering on the deck beside her daughter. She went to push Huriye's hair from her face, but two men took her by the ankles and pulled her away.

'Don't touch her!' Noor shouted in Arabic.

A sharp pain at the back of her head and everything blurred to black.

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