

Chapter 7

The man with Zeki had seemed friendly enough, so why did Mehmet feel like the worries of the world were burdening him? He couldn't understand what, but there had been something strange about him. And to add fuel to the thought, Zeki had been too friendly since the meeting.

“Senturk, Mehmet, come over here for a minute, please.”

The pair hadn't long been back from the markets and Mehmet was shattered. He'd been on his feet all day, walking, running, worrying for his security after a series of small robberies. It was too hot and humid for that time of year, especially under the jetty where there was no chance of picking up a breeze. He just wanted to be left alone. But now Zeki was calling them over with a sickly sweet voice. And he said please – so unbelievable. What was he up to? Senturk rose from his nest and Mehmet came into line beside him. They sat next to Zeki on the beam behind the ladder, dangling their legs over the side.

Zeki smiled. “I've been doing some thinking about the markets,” he began. “The two of you are a good team and it's time to move you up. I want to expand the target area and start by hitting those markets on the other side of the Golden Horn. I've decided to let you two head up a gang there and I want you to start with the quayside market at Sirkeci. Take the cell you usually work with and do it tomorrow around mid-morning.”

“But that's crazy,” Senturk said. “Nobody over there knows our reputation, so seven won't be enough. You know from way back that if we're not in a mob and the victim isn't scared, he'll turn on us. If the crowd see that, they'll help. No, it's crazy. We'll be in prison by the end of the day.”

“If what you just said were true then yes, but there won't only be seven of you. I've been collecting boys in Sirkeci for months now and I've set them up under a jetty over there. I told you to do it mid-morning because that's when the new boys will be there. Including the

boys from here, you'll number about thirty. When the jobs done, they'll take you to your new home. Any problems with that?"

"Are these new boys any good?"

"You know you don't need to ask me that, Senturk."

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The following morning, Mehmet and Senturk hung over the railings on the upper level of the bridge and watched the activity in the open-air market below. There were stalls all the way to the barrier at the jetty edge, most selling fish. However, every so often, blankets of smoke clouded upward highlighting the kebab stalls. Buses lined up where the market ended and made a natural perimeter fence. Mehmet had been scouring the place for over an hour and was beginning to feel edgy. Until now, the only boys he'd seen had come from Galata with him and Senturk.

"Our group is clear enough, so where are these new boys?" Mehmet asked. "Maybe a few could've melted into the crowd, but more than twenty? I don't think so."

Senturk made no response.

"I don't like this," Mehmet continued, almost pleading now. "I think we should cut and run. This doesn't feel right. You must've noticed how weird Zeki's been since we followed him."

Senturk gave Mehmet a long-suffering stare. "Look, I don't like the idea of moving over here much either and that's the only reason you're worrying now. But there's no need; if they don't turn up, we leave – simple. And as far as Zeki goes, he didn't even know I was with you at the bridge."

Senturk wouldn't be moved and Mehmet supposed he was probably right. If the boys didn't show then they wouldn't rob. Like he said, what could go wrong?

“Let’s see if we can get a better handle on things from below,” Senturk said. “They might be underneath the bridge where we can’t see them.”

They went down onto the lower jetty and Mehmet stared over to the floating pontoons that held the centre of the bridge up and watched a small boat motor through and towards the strait. Black smoke billowed as it chugged towards the main stream. The backwash from its wake lapped small white horses against the floats.

Senturk pulled on his arm and Mehmet went along – reluctantly. “Let’s get to the main part of the market. Maybe they’re there now.”

But they weren’t.

“Still no sign of the boys, but there are two of the gang we came over with,” Mehmet said and pointed to a couple of boys who stood making faces at the dead fish on the stalls and laughing. They went and chatted to them, but they hadn’t seen any potential gang members either.

It was midday now and the smell of food was everywhere. “I should be feeling hungry, but I’m not. Something isn’t right here, Senturk,” Mehmet said, and just as he finished speaking, as if the words themselves had signalled his demise, gunfire rang out and an undulating crowd flowed from whatever had happened. The boys went off one way while Mehmet and Senturk went the other. Two shots in quick succession and then a third; someone was firing at the two boys who’d just left them. Mehmet picked up speed. A shot whizzed past close by and a child ahead of him fell. It could only have been the mother who screamed, as she bent over the boy, clutched his blood-spattered body to her breast.

“Quick, get along to the end of the lower level,” Senturk yelled. “If we can get to the rail, we can jump onto one of the floating pontoons and hide.”

They raced the length of the jetty but a crowd of people had gathered near the rail. More gunfire echoed, the boys raced straight at the throng and it separated into folds along

the boardwalk, like Moses parting the Red Sea. They crouched down and arched arms protectively over their heads as if it were the boys who had the guns. As the minutes passed, the shooting seemed to be moving further away. There was still a chance they could make an escape. Mehmet's heart pounded in his ears. Fear had stopped his legs working properly, but surely he could make it a few more strides. If he could get to the railings and jump to the pontoon, he'd be safe.

Another shot cracked out; they were closing in again. Senturk was running a couple of steps ahead when a sudden thud resounded and sent his body forward that much faster. His head turned sideways as blood spurted from his mouth and he fell to the jetty, his chest exploding in front of him.