

Chapter One

Istanbul breathed differently.

The air was thicker, more fragrant, lined with cardamom and diesel, roasted chestnuts and sea salt from the Bosphorus. Sounds layered like sediment: heels clacking on cobblestone, prayer calls folding into street music, seagulls screaming like they owned the sky. Esra Demir paused outside the terminal doors, hand gripping the worn leather strap of her bag, and let it all sink in.

She'd been here before. Summers with her father Adem, who insisted she learn the difference between gözleme and börek, who smoked too much and pointed out crumbling ruins like they were family heirlooms. But this was the first time she came alone, and not for family, not for vacation. For the story.

"Write something that matters," her professor had said before she boarded the plane. "Something no one else is looking at. Go where others won't."

Esra had grown up in the northern suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, raised between Turkish and American gravity fields. Her mother, Lisa, was a high school counselor from Charleston, South Carolina who loved casseroles, morning radio, and quoting Southern idioms that made Esra cringe and smile in equal measure. Her father was from Izmir. He sold tile and stone, sometimes antique replicas, sometimes the real thing. Their house always smelled like cumin, lavender, and lemon cleaner.

When Esra brought friends home, the same questions always surfaced. How did her mother, the textbook example of a polite Southern woman, end up with a man like Adem Demir? He was unlike anyone else in the neighborhood. To most, he was charming and magnetic. To a few, he was unnerving in a way they could never explain. Her friends called him "hunky," a term Esra hated but understood. He was tall in a way that made rooms feel smaller. His olive skin never burned in the sun, and his jet-black hair, even as he aged, never dulled. His green eyes shifted in the light, sometimes bright, sometimes dark. He had a quietness about him and people noticed him even when he didn't speak. He had that kind of stillness that made others feel watched. Esra used to wonder if he had learned it or if it was something he had carried with him long before Myrtle Beach.

That was where her parents met. He was in college, doing his "Work and Travel" program, lifeguarding on the coast. Caroline Sinclair was vacationing with her cousins. The story went that he saw her rescuing a beach umbrella from the wind, and offered to help. That was the beginning. He liked to say he saved her from the Atlantic. Her mother liked to say she saved him from himself.