## ***Drops of July on the Bosphorus***

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#### ***Synopsis***

Mila, a thirty-one-year-old from Niš, after the breakup of a long relationship and an exhausting work period, decides to travel to Turkey. Even she herself does not know what exactly she is looking for - vacation, silence or herself. A stay in a luxury hotel on the Bosphorus was supposed to be a short escape, but everything changes when she meets Ibrahim, the mysterious hotel owner, in whose eyes there is something that he himself does not want to discover.

As the past intertwines with the present, and destinies begin to intertwine, Mila must decide - whether to remain a stranger in his world or to be a woman who dares to enter it.

Drops of July on the Bosphorus is a story about encounters that change, silences that speak louder than words and love that is born where you least expect it - between different worlds, but under the same sky.

#### ***Prologue***

There are cities where you get lost. But there are also those where you really arrive for the first time.

The Bosphorus was silent in the kind of silence that neither sea nor man can spoil. There was no wind.

Only the golden light that caressed the stone walls, the breath of salt in the air and footsteps that were not heard.

Mila was standing on the terrace of the hotel, a few hours after landing.

She didn't know why she came out just then. She didn't even know what she was feeling.

And somewhere in that moment—something in her stomach fluttered softly. Not for the thrill. Not because of the new city. Already because of something that could not be named. As if someone was watching her. As if someone already knew that right there, that summer, someone would learn how to love again.

#### ***CHAPTER I***

***Little girl and a bracelet***

Some cities don't ask you who you are. They are simply waiting for you.

She arrived in Istanbul on a warm July afternoon, with two suitcases, tired eyes and a heart that was no longer afraid of emptiness. The taxi entered a narrow, cobbled street, where cars barely pass, and the canopies of old buildings seemed to guard the shadows of someone's long-ago stories. The hotel—the stone facade, the green shutters, the smell of lemons from the terrace—didn't look like a tourist stop, but something that coincidentally coincided with it. She wasn't looking for luxury. She wanted a breath

She waited at the reception while the young man neatly typed her information. She was holding a passport and a hat that she no longer needed. The walls were cold, but the air was soft.

And then - in an instant someone passed by the reception desk. Tall, with dark hair, in a shirt with rolled up sleeves.

He didn't look directly at her. He didn't smile. But there was something in his passing that awakened an unnecessary alertness in all her senses. Like when someone closes the door but doesn't close it all the way.

***Some looks don't touch. They just stop you in your thoughts, so you don't even know what you want anymore.***

The room had a window overlooking the sea—but more by feel than by sight. The air smelled of July and something unfamiliar.

She took off her heels, threw her hat on the bed, and opened the window wide. From the street came the voice of a child selling flowers. She smiled. She took a notebook out of her bag. She wrote one sentence:

“I may not know where I am, but this city doesn’t ask for anything from me. It gives me space to breathe.”

Then a little girl stopped under the window with a basket of string bracelets. Black hair tied in a bun, dressed as if she had just arrived from a fairy tale***.***

— Bilezik, abla? A happy color for the heart. — she added with a smile. Mila came down. She didn't say anything. She bought one, a blue one.

— For you. Because you are good, said the little girl and ran down the street like the wind.

A few steps away, an old man sat on a low stool, with a cat on his lap and a cup of tea on a makeshift table.

— Ceylan, he pointed to the cat. She knows who has come to stay.

Mila smiled.

— I still don't know if I'm staying***.***

— That's why she likes you.

She fell asleep late that night. Not because she couldn't sleep, but because she didn't want her first impression to be lost in her sleep. It was as if she wanted to remember everything - the warm air, and that fleeting glance, and the little girl from the fairy tale, and the old man with the cat, and the feeling that, for the first time in a long time, she had arrived somewhere - and not escaped.

#### ***CHAPTER II***

***Unknown man***

The morning in Istanbul smelled of coffee and sesame bread.

The city woke up in layers — first passers-by, then vendors, and only then the voices from the minaret.

The sun was already caressing the facade of the hotel when she opened the window.

From the balcony, you could see the Bosphorus, the same one that was only a picture in the imagination until yesterday. She put on sandals on her bare feet, pulled on hastily. She didn't want to miss the moment of that first real morning in the city that smelled of promise. As she descended the stairs, she heard music—not from the radio, but from the street. An old woman was selling roses, and a young man was sitting on the edge of the sidewalk playing the saxophone. She was holding a notebook in her hand. The same black notebook she wrote in when she was trying to remember herself. She sat down in a small cafe on the corner, ordered a coffee and opened a new page.

"The first city I came to, not to run away from someone, but to find something in myself." — she wrote.

— Excuse me, is this seat taken? The voice was deep, but not too formal. She looked up.

In front of her stood a man in a white shirt, with carefully rolled up sleeves and a gentle smile. It was the same one from the hotel. The man who passed by the reception desk yesterday, without even looking at her for a moment.

— Here you go, she said, although she thought: now we'll see who you are.

They sat across from each other. He ordered a coffee and asked her if she liked the city.

The conversation flowed easily, as if they already knew each other. Mila talked about Serbia, about how she had been translating someone's words for years, but never her own. He nodded, not saying a word.

— What is your name? she asked.

— Ibrahim.

— Nice name.

— And you? he asked.

— Mila.

— And yours too. He said.

She was confused but didn't answer anything, just smiled slightly.

— I'm glad to have met such a lovely woman, whose name suits her perfectly.

He said, and Mila got even more confused.

The silence that followed was not uncomfortable. It was like the first beat in music — something that promises rhythm.

— Can I show you something? he asked.

— Now?

—Yes, right now.

She herself didn't know why she went with him, but she did. She wasn't afraid.

They walked along the gravel streets, then stopped at a small gate. On the other side was the pier. The old man was waiting by the wooden boat, and Ibrahim nodded.

— Are we sailing? She asked with a smile.

— "We're sailing," he replied.

The boat rocked softly as they stepped onto it. The water touched the sides of the ship as if it knew them.

The captain—an old man with a hat that served him more as a souvenir than protection from the sun—asked nothing. He started the engine and looked towards Ibrahim, as if he knew where he should take them. She sat on the side, watching the coast slowly recede. Walls, windows, sheets on the terraces — everything slid past them like a scene from another life. She felt something melting inside her, not from the sun, but from that inner restlessness that had finally subsided for a while.

— This is not a tourist route, is it? she asked.

— No, he didn't, he answered.

I am not a tour guide.

She smiled. It was one of those sentences that needed no explanation, because she had already said it all.

— Why did you call me today?

— Because you opened the window today.

— If I had known that was all I had to do, I would have done it yesterday.

— You wouldn't. You arrived yesterday.

You have arrived today — indeed.

She looked down at her hands. One was lying on the edge of the boat, and the other unconsciously clutched the edge of her skirt. She was not allowed to ask some questions. Not yet.

— What do you see when you look at the water? He asked, unexpectedly.

— It depends. Sometimes a reflection. Sometimes the truth. Sometimes nothing.

— And sometimes someone's eyes, he added quietly.

She didn't answer anything.

They sailed under bridges.

People were small, the world was big. Mila felt the wind fill her lungs like the first breath after a long dive. She didn't know how long they sailed, time lost its meaning.

— Do you want us to stop? - asked the captain. Ibrahim looked at Mila. She nodded that she would.

They disembarked at a small pier, hidden behind stone steps that led to the old part of the city. The streets were quiet, smelling of damp earth and barbecue smoke. On the corner, a woman was selling bracelets made of thread and glass beads. Mila stopped her step, approached and chose a blue one with an eye.

— Against the spell, said the saleswoman.

 — Or for a start, she answered and put it on her wrist.

 Ibrahim was silent. But that silence was not cold. It was like a half-open window.

 I expect you for dinner tonight, he said briefly when they returned and left.

#### ***CHAPTER III***

***Terrace and discoveries***

Mila stood in front of the mirror, thoughtful. She had nothing special to wear, but she still chose a simple, linen, olive-colored dress. She didn’t know if this dinner was official or private. She didn’t know anything, but she agreed anyway.

There were several tables on the terrace.

On one of them stood a candlestick with three flames and two glasses already filled with wine.

Ibrahim was already there. With a white shirt and a look that didn’t deviate from the color of the night.

— I sat down earlier. The sea is most beautiful when it’s quiet, — he said, looking at the distant shore.

— You’ll speak in riddles too, she smiled.

And he laughed softly. As if that sound was accidental, as if it wasn’t his. And that’s exactly why she liked it.

— Maybe I didn’t introduce myself properly, so I wanted to improve the impression.

— Are you from here? she asked.

— I am and I am not. I grew up in Istanbul, but the world pulled me in all directions.

— Some cities lose you in order to find you better, he added.

They were silent for a while. They listened to music that could barely be heard from the speakers, a mixture of Turkish folklore and jazz.

The world was slowed down at that moment, as if there was that table, that terrace, those two people who were trying not to ask too many questions.

— Do you know... he began,

but he was interrupted by the phone.

Very professionally, he stood up and took a few steps away. It wasn't loud, but she heard:

— Tell the staff not to change anything. Tasting starts at nine.

— No, I don't want new guests in that period.

... He stopped. He looked at her and realized that she had heard more than she should have.

When he came back, he didn't say anything, but changed the subject.

***Sometimes you don't have to know everything right away. Some truths are like wine—they get better with age.***

She smiled and leaned her elbow on the table.

Dinner was at nine o'clock. The smell and taste of the food were so tempting that she immediately forgot about his phone conversation.

They drank another glass of wine, and then he suggested that they go for a walk.

— Yes, she said.

The evening was cooler than she expected, with a gentle breeze carrying the scent of sea salt. They went for a walk, away from the crowds of tourist trails, towards the narrow cobbled streets of Karakoy.

It was a bit strange even for her that they became close so quickly.

When she went on vacation, it never crossed her mind that it would be so soon

get closer to a complete stranger.

His words were not numerous, but each one was like a step that led them further — into a story that was in no hurry to reveal itself.

— Do you like to get lost? he asked suddenly, looking at her with dimly lit eyes.

— Maybe sometimes — she admitted, but only if someone knows the way back.

— And I know some paths that lead not only back, but also to something new, he said quietly, and that voice seemed to be for her.

The streets were full of shadows and at the same time full of light.

From the windows of small shops, from the windows of inns, from the street lanterns that cast yellow warmth on the stone pavements.

Mila noticed people walking past them, not paying attention, but she felt like the two of them were carrying their own little secret—something that didn't have to be said to exist.

At one corner, an old tea seller greeted them with a slight bow, as if he had known Ibrahim for many years. She noticed how the man answered him quietly.

— Someone here knows you, she thought, but she didn't dare to ask.

In those moments, as they walked in silence, anticipation was in the air, as if all the answers would appear when she least expected it. At the end of a narrow street they reached a small square with a wooden bench under a lilac tree. They sat down, as if something had prompted them to do so, without agreement.

 Mila folded her hands in her lap, looking ahead, while he rested his gaze somewhere in the distance.

— "It's the first time I'm in a city that doesn't seem foreign to me," she said in a low voice.

 He looked at her, a short smile that didn't reach his lips, but warmed the air around her.

— "Maybe the city recognizes something in you," he said.

— Some people do not need to belong to a place — they enliven it with their presence.

That sentence touched something in her unexpectedly. Her chest heaved slightly in a quiet sigh, and her heart began to beat a little faster.

She looked at him and caught his gaze, this time it wasn't absent, it wasn't foggy. He was there. Completely. At that moment, it was as if the world around them fell silent.

— What do you do when you're not taking tourists to hidden streets? — she asked, half-seriously, wanting to break through that invisible curtain.

He smiled, just a little.

— I don’t take tourists, I told you. But I made an exception for you.

— Can I ask you something? — she asked quietly.

— Always. He smiled, not looking at her directly.

— Why are you... in the hotel so often?

— I mean... you're not a tourist, and you act like someone who is both host and guest. You're not from far away, you were born here.

— So why this hotel?

He paused for a moment, as if weighing the weight of her question. His gaze slid to the sea, then back to her.

— That place has a soul. He said, almost thoughtfully.

— There's something about the way the sun streams in through the window of room 305... or the silence of the courtyard when the city falls silent.

— Some hotels stay with a person, even when he thinks he is looking for something else.

— So... you're coming back because of the window? She laughed, trying to figure out if he was joking.

He shrugged enigmatically.

— Maybe because of the view. Maybe because of some memory. And maybe because of someone who always shows up when I least expect it.

She didn't ask anymore. She knew she wouldn't get an answer from him.

But she remained even more curious.

They sat a little longer, saying nothing more. A tram bell could be heard in the distance. Time passed, but for them it seemed to stop.

— By the way, there’s a nice walk along the coast tomorrow morning, if you want. It starts at eight sharp.

— The guide is friendly but silent.

— “Maybe I’ll come,” she said.

— And maybe I'll wait for you.

#### ***CHAPTER IV***

***Morning on the Bosphorus***

The smell of salt and sun was just waking up, and the water looked like a mirror where someone had left it the night before.

She arrived at exactly eight o'clock. Although the yacht seemed like a scene from another life, not her own, Mila's steps were calm.

Ibrahim was already there. He stood leaning against the metal railing, looking out at the horizon, a cup of Turkish coffee in his hand. He didn't turn around immediately. He didn't have to. It was as if he knew she had arrived. When she lifted her foot onto the first metal step of the yacht, he turned.

— Are you ready to sail away into the magic of the Bosphorus?

— he asked quietly, but with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

— It depends. Will I come back the same?

— No, you won't. Once you feel the magic of this place... you will never want to leave it.

She didn't answer.

She started towards him, step by step, as if she were walking towards something that should not be named. He extended his hand, without haste, as an invitation without expectation.

A woman in a white shirt and her hair tied in a low ponytail was now standing next to a man who wasn't asking any questions.

And yet — he knew everything.

The yacht slowly set off. There was no music. Only the sound of the waves talking, and two souls who were silent. The wind was gentle, but enough to blow her hair out of her ponytail. Ibrahim pointed towards the old fort on the shore.

— That's Rumeli Hisar. It was built in the 15th century, so that the Ottomans could cut off the connection between the Black Sea and Constantinople. It is said that the walls still remember every look that looked at them.

Mila remained silent, and he continued, not expecting answers, presence was enough.

— On the other side you will see Anadoli Hisar. Smaller, but older. One looks at Europe, the other at Asia. Just like us now.

— What do you think... Where do we belong?

— She asked.

He looked at her but didn't answer right away.

— Some people don't need a side. A transition is enough for them.

They passed palaces from the age of the Sultans, with terraces that seemed to whisper stories.

Below, in the water, sometimes a fish would rustle, and in the distance - a call to prayer that was lost in the wind.

— People used to come here to forget. Now they come to remind themselves - he added quietly. She looked at the changing shore, at the shadows and lights she saw for the first time, and she felt something inside her becoming lighter.

It's like every place has its own breath. And the Bosphorus had a memory.

Time passed like a dream. The yacht glided as if not touching the water, but moving through some other space — one where days are not measured by hours, but by feelings. Mila was sitting next to him, although she wasn't looking at him all the time.

Her gaze was fixed on the shores that passed by like living images.

Windows. All those windows. Luxurious, wooden, with lace curtains. Some open, some closed. Some with light, some with silence. It's as if every window tells its own story, and she wants to hear them all. She couldn't hide her smile.

She was as excited as a child.

Not for luxury. Not because of the yacht. Already because her soul, for the first time in a long time, looked with eyes that did not seek answers — but admired.

 Ibrahim watched her out of the corner of his eye. He didn't say anything. He just noticed.

– That's what a man who comes back to himself looks like, he thought.

She rested her elbow on the railing of the yacht, and supported her cheek with her palm. They passed another villa with wooden terraces and windows that looked like the eyes of an old but noble soul.

— Imagine there, in one of those rooms, sitting for a summer and writing letters that you never send... — she whispered, but not loud enough to call it a sentence addressed to someone.

He was still silent.

But she knew he heard.

And that's exactly why she told him that.

The sun was already high, and the golden reflections on the surface of the water became sharp. Heat began to fill the space around the yacht, as if the sea began to sweat.

Mila lifted her hair from her neck and smiled slightly.

— I think it's time to go back. This morning... it's getting too real.

Ibrahim nodded. Without a word, he turned the yacht back, like someone who knows he doesn't always have to explain himself. As they neared the shore, she took one last look at the mansions and the windows that passed by like a slow-motion frame from a movie she would never watch again. There was neither sadness nor euphoria in her. Some... inexplicable peace.

When they returned, she didn't say anything. There was no need.

Then Ibrahim said:

— We did not sail to find something. but to know that something exists.

#### ***CHAPTER V***

***Under the veil of mystery***

In the evening, she decided to take a walk around the shops.

She admired souvenirs, colorful shop windows, cheerful and kind people, and when she got tired, she sat down to drink coffee, still watching all those cheerful passers-by.

—I don't like it when people sit alone, in silence.

She flinched when she heard Ibrahim's voice, she didn't expect him to appear.

— Are you following me, she asked?

He laughed out loud.

— Of course not, he said. I happened to see you sitting alone.

— I came to be alone, in silence.

 And instead I got that you were always there somewhere.

— Then we have a problem.

— How is that?

— Because this is not silence. This is some other music.

She didn't know if she liked the way he talked more or the way he kept quiet just what others would say.

They talked about small things, and when they left, they passed a stall with dried fruits. She took a piece of candied orange and closed her eyes.

— The smell of the Bosphorus in her hair, she said more for herself.

— What?

—That's how everything seems to me. Like something familiar but elusive. It's like you've already been in someone's dream, but you don't remember where.

He stared at her a little too long.

She understood and looked away.

— Sorry, sometimes I say things that don't sound normal.

— They sound like you, he answered.

At that moment, from the direction of a carpet shop, an elderly man came out and stopped, as if he was not sure if he could see well.

— Effendim... Ibrahim Bey?

— he said with an expression of respect and wonder at the same time. Mila turned to the unknown man, then quickly to Ibrahim.

He smiled briefly and nodded his head in greeting, but quickly and almost awkwardly.

—Selamün aleyküm, amca

– he said briefly, but warmly.

 An elderly man approached him, touched his hand and added with a smile:

—Allah seni korusun, so you're here... everyone says you're never gone!

— Sometimes I'm even where no one expects it, he answered with a smile, and then discreetly showed him with his hand that he was in company.

When they continued walking, Mila nodded her head in the direction of the alley:

 — Does anyone know you...?

— "An old friend of the family," he said calmly, without adding anything more.

— It sounded like you were someone important, she added half-jokingly, but still with intention.

He looked at her with a smile, the way one looks when one doesn't want to reveal too much.

— In Istanbul, every square has its own story. And some people remember more than they should.

— You are protected by a mystery, she smiled.

— "Maybe it's better that way," he replied quietly.

And as if to change the subject, he offered her tea from a small shop around the corner.

 There were just the two of them among the many, but a vague feeling began to rise in her heart that there was a man beside her - much bigger than she had thought.

She did not see him the next day.

Not in the hotel lobby, not in the yard, not in the passage to the kitchen where he drank Turkish coffee every morning. Not even in a restaurant.

It was as if he had evaporated from the hotel.

For the first time since she arrived, she felt something like emptiness.

It's funny, she thought, because I don't even know who he really is.

 And I already miss it.

What level of irrationality is this?

In the hotel room, she sat on the bed for a long time, turning the pages on her phone, but did not read any of them.

In the store in Niš, she might have laughed to herself — but here, in Istanbul, everything sounded deeper.

Even silence.

She asked one of the maids if Ibrahim came down this morning. The woman's smile was neutral.

— He's gone, Hanimefendi.

— He will be back in a day or two.

— Do you know where?

The maid shrugged her shoulders.

— Only the management knows.

Management knows, she repeated to herself.

And who is the management?

The question sounded funny, but it was quite serious.

If he's a hotel worker, why didn't he tell her?

Why would you hide it? What is there to hide?

Nothing was clear to her, but she was sure of one thing — it's fine, as soon as the maid knows, but she won't tell.

And to leave like that and not answer, and there was nothing urgent — that was disrespectful to her.

Astonishment and confusion were replaced by insult.

That night, she almost didn't sleep because of the various movies in her head.

#### ***CHAPTER VI***

***Sea and distance***

Ibrahim was not there for the next two days. Not a trace of him.

She put on a light dress, took a towel and glasses and headed for the roof of the hotel.

The pool glistened next to a small bar in the shade. It was not a real restaurant, but a corner for cocktails and smiles before the sunset... with a beautiful view of the Bosphorus.

She lay down on the lounge and closed her eyes. There was no thought. Air, skin, the sound of water and the occasional voices of children playing nearby.

She took the book from the bag that she had taken with her for the first time while still in the air, but the pages seemed superfluous to her.

As if now she was living in a novel.

She put the book down and got into the water.

She bathed for a long time. No rush.

She went to lunch alone.

The waiter asked her if she wanted a table for two. Maybe out of habit.

Or because she was in company every day.

She shook her head and smiled.

— Just for one. And only today.

After lunch, she walked to the old quarter, bought a ceramic mug that said

“Hayat bir gundur, oh da bugundur”.

Life is one day — and that's today.

And as if with that slogan something changed in her.

Tomorrow maybe he will be there again. Or they won't.

Dear God, relax and enjoy yourself. Don't think about it, don't think about him anymore.

It's as if she slapped herself to come to her senses.

She put the cup in her bag and continued walking through the cobblestones. No rush.

In the evening, when the hotel lights dimly illuminated the courtyard, she sat

is alone at a small table, with a cup of unfinished coffee.

She watched the shadows fall across the walls—soft, shifting, but always the same. Like her thoughts.

She drank the silence sip by sip.

She was tired of the questions, but she still didn't have any answers.

She didn't even know where to start asking, or who.

The next day, she visited a few places in the city — the Kapali bazaar, the fragrant alleys full of pomegranates and incense, the mother-of-pearl mosques that shone under the July sky.

In a postcard shop, she found the same song she heard the first night they met. She paused.

The seller looked at her and asked something in Turkish, but she nodded and left, forgetting even the postcard she had already chosen.

She returned to the hotel earlier than planned.

In the room, she opened the window and sat on the edge of the bed.

The wind caressed the curtain.

On the bedside table, a bracelet with a blue eye glinted like a silent reminder.

She touched it and smiled, but it wasn't the smile from two days ago—more like a reflex, like when you remember that you used to believe in fairy tales.

At some point, she heard a knock. She opened the door, hoping for... something.

The maid.

— Do you need something, honey? she asked gently.

— No... Actually, yes. Do you know... will Ibrahim again...?

— "He will come back," said the woman quietly, almost confidentially.

— Give him time.

She thanked and closed the door.

Give him time, she repeated as if it was the last thing she had to hold on to.

What does he give time to?

His return? Or her fear of what she would find out when she returned?

And so another night passed.

 And another morning.

#### ***CHAPTER VII***

***Some truths come out suddenly***

The next day she went out, lowering her hat and putting on her glasses.

Step by step down the stairs, through the hall, with a smile on her lips—and then, suddenly, she stopped.

He was standing at the very entrance, at the door of the hotel.

Ibrahim.

He was putting down the phone and waving to the driver, when someone outside the hotel shouted in Turkish, suddenly and angrily.

In the next moment, everything turned into chaos. Two men, dusty and rough, suddenly clashed at the very entrance of the hotel.

One pulled something out of his belt — a metallic glint, followed by a woman's scream from a nearby boutique.

Mila remained as if buried.

Her legs didn't know how to take a step back or forward. Look — right into him.

He was already moving. Fast, sure, like someone who has done it before.

With one move, he knocked down one man, with another move he took away the weapons, while the hotel's security and two uniformed men were already running towards the scene. It all took a minute, maybe less.

But enough.

— Mr. Yilmaz, are you okay?

— came someone in a gray suit.

Yilmaz? Mr. Yilmaz?

She repeated to herself.

He turned to her - calmly, as if nothing had happened.

This was followed by the voice of an employee who said:

— The hotel is now secured, Mr. Director.

Director?

He is the owner.

Ibrahim nodded briefly, approached her and quietly said:

— I'm sorry you had to see this.

She didn't know what was scarier—the incident or him.

Or what she knew now.

She was in double shock.

— No problem, she answered briefly, coldly, as if she had spoken a sentence she had learned by heart.

She paused for a moment to adjust the strap of her shoulder bag, and walked on without looking back.

Her legs were walking, but her thoughts were not keeping up.

Some emptiness in the stomach.

The wind from the Bosphorus was gentle, but her face was warm.

However, there was someone else. She didn't invent him, but she didn't know him either.

She left him standing in front of the hotel, surrounded by people who saw him as an important man.

And she—she was a woman in a summer dress, who decided at that moment that she needed a walk more than an answer.

At least for now.

#### ***CHAPTER VIII***

***Repentance and truth***

In the evening, she did not turn on the light in the room. She didn't want to talk to the maid or herself.

She sat on the edge of the bed and took off her sandals. The cold tiles under her feet were the only thing she could understand at that moment.

She didn't cry. She wasn't thinking.

The knock on the door was soft. Twice, with a break. As someone who doesn't come for the first time.

She opened them, without saying a word.

He stood there, as if he didn't know if he had the right to stand.

— Can I come in? he asked.

His voice was uncertain.

— You can. But don't talk if you have nothing to say.

He sat down on a chair by the window. He did not look at her, nor at himself.

— I'm guilty. I knew you would react that way. And that's why I hid.

Mila was standing next to the table, her palms resting on the wood, as if she was holding herself up with it.

— For what? If you had told me the first day, I wouldn't have gone. But now…

— Because you looked at me as a person. Not as a name on the door. You didn't know who I was.

And for the first time, after a long time, I didn't know who I was either.

 I was a man who wants to spend five more minutes next to a woman who knows how to listen to silence.

She didn't answer. She just looked at him. It seemed to her that his face was older than the one she had seen the first time. Or he stopped wearing the mask.

— That hotel has been a part of me for years. Sometimes I am a guest in my own life.

And then you came with a suitcase and I didn't know if I wanted to be the host or the man sitting with you in silence.

She looked him straight in the eyes. And there were no more questions or fears. The only feeling is that they are both — for the first time

– in the same place at the same time.

— Why did you come now?

— Because I couldn't bear the thought of you leaving without knowing the truth.

 Even if it's the end, I want you to know.

That nothing was a game.

Silence fell, but it didn't hurt.

— It’s not the end, she said quietly. But it’s not the beginning either.

 Now there’s something in between. And you have to earn it.

He nodded.He sat deeper in his chair, like someone settling into their life for the first time.

— How could you keep quiet when you found out? And how that says more about you than it does about me.

— It scares me that you’re the only place I could be someone else — and now I want to be who I am.

— What are you?

He was silent.

And then, for the first time, he said more to himself than to her:

— A man who ran away to work because he didn’t know how to stay with someone... and then you came, and I didn’t want to run away anymore.

She looked at him.

 For the first time, without distance.

— I’m not here to be your escape.

I’m here because I wanted to be mine.

— And that’s what attracted me the most. Because I didn’t want anyone to follow me.

 I wanted someone I could stand next to. Silence. Simple. Pleasant.

No pressure. No questions.

She moved away from the window, took a cup with a little tea in it, and sat on the bed.

— Maybe it’s best to start from scratch.

— Not from the beginning, he said.

— No... but from a place where we weren’t acting.

— Then there was that morning on the yacht. When you had no questions - just a look full of admiration. Mila smiled.

— Maybe we didn’t know who we were then... but we knew it was real. He stood up. He didn't approach her. — If you ever want to forget everything, come to that place where we were silent under the bridges.

— And if I don't want to forget?

— I'll definitely be there and wait.

#### ***CHAPTER IX***

***Leaving without reason***

The next morning, Mila had breakfast alone. Without a thought.

No question.

She left the key at the reception.

She didn't say until when.

She didn't ask for a taxi.

She started down the street, one suitcase and a hat in hand.

She didn't bring anything else.

At the hotel, the maid found the room untouched, the bed made, a notebook and a blue thread bracelet on the table.

The truth doesn't hurt. Just wake up what you wanted to sleep through.

Ibrahim asked the staff, but no one knew.

She didn't leave a message.

She didn't say where she was going.

She wasn't one to follow.

— She just left like that? he asked.

— Hanimefendi said that maybe it's time for a little sea on the other side of town, said the maid, shrugging her shoulders. She said she didn't know where she was going, but she knew she was going alone.

Three days passed without her.

He was sitting on the same bench under the lilac. People were passing by. The cats were lying down.

Time was not angry that she was not coming, but was silent with him.

And she is...

... got on the train.

Got off at the station without a plan.

The sea did not speak here like in Istanbul. It didn't have that deep, searing silence, or the waves that whisper stories. It was simple—blue, expansive, peaceful. It's like he's not asking for anything. It's like it's ready to receive you.

She was in Şile—a small place on the shores of the Black Sea, where the city ends and the silence begins.

She had no plan, she had a desire not to be seen. Every day the lighthouse looked at the horizon, as if searching for what she was trying to forget.

No one asked anything in the boarding house.

They gave her a key and a cup of tea, without an appraising look.

In the room — a single bed, a wooden table and a window overlooking the docks.

While she was coming, she bought a postcard that she will never send.

And she wrote:

***Sometimes you have to leave, to see if someone will look for you.***

And left it on the table next to a cup of tea.

She put on a light shirt, tied her hair in a messy ponytail and went to the promenade. People sold shells, figs, and candles in the shape of seagulls. The children screamed with happiness.

And she walked - aimlessly.

In a local cafe, she sat by the sea. Ordered a coffee, and smiled to herself.

In the end, I wear this fragrance everywhere.

The waiter was older, with kind hands and eyes that didn't stare for too long.

— A tourist?

— A woman passing by.

— The most beautiful are those who don't stay too long, he said and left the coffee.

She knew:

Istanbul is not behind her. But she's not sure she wants him back yet.

The next day, she went to the place that the hostess from the boarding house had mentioned to her in a whisper

— Ağlayan Kaya, the Weeping Rock.

The road led through the shade of pines, along a coast that did not promise comfort, but did not refuse it either. The waves were breaking against the stone, and the sea was gray - blue, like eyes that have been silent for a long time.

The rock rose above the cliff, still and wet. Drops slid down its surface like invisible tears. It was cold water, spring-like, as if it came from the earth itself—or from a heart that can no longer speak.

Legend has it that here, many years ago, a girl from the village loved a soldier. But love was not allowed to her. Her parents chose another.

She ran away - not to jump, but to be silent. And she cried for days on that rock, until she said a single word.

People came to comfort her, but the water continued to drip.

 And when she disappeared, they say that the rock was left to cry instead.

Mila was looking at the drop that remained on the edge of the stone. Then she slipped away – quietly, without a sound.

Like a sentence she didn't say.

Like a question she didn't get an answer to.

She didn't know if she believed in legends.

But she knew what it was like to be told how you should feel instead of being asked how you feel.

That's why this rock was closer to her than any other person that day.

Maybe she was waiting for someone too.

Maybe she didn't wait.

And maybe, just like me, they read it wrong.

The sea below her rustled but did not call. It was just there. To listen.

And that was enough.

#### ***CHAPTER X***

***The Man Who Didn't Know He Was Left Alone***

The lights in Ibrahim's office were dimmed. It had been three days.

He didn't know where Mila was.

No one knew.

And that hurt him more than he thought. Not because she hadn't left a message. Not because she hadn't said goodbye.

 But because... she didn't have to.

***When you no longer owe someone an explanation - that's freedom. But also the end.***

In his hand he held the thread bracelet he had found with the maid. Blue. His favorite tone.

She brought the other one, she left this one, and...

this one was the first.

He leaned on the table and looked out the window.

Istanbul was roaring as always.

People were coming in and out, the head of the hall asked him for the number of reservations, someone asked for a signature for the purchase of wine.

He answered. Signed. He nodded.

But inside...

When was the last time you were a person and not a role?

When was the last time you said 'I don't know' and meant it?

When was the last time you wanted someone to see you... not look at you?

He didn't know what he would say if he showed up.

Maybe nothing.

Maybe he would stand like that day—when he looked at her, and she walked past him as if she didn't know him.

And you know what's worse?

He deserved it.

Because he didn't lie. But he was silent.

Because he didn't hide it - but he didn't reveal it either.

Because he was a man who knows how to keep quiet, but does not yet know how to speak with his heart.

And now...

He sits alone and wonders if he has lost something he didn't even have yet.

He didn't go home that night.

He didn't even know where his house would be.

It used to be a hotel. Once an office. Sometimes a terrace with a view of the sea.

And now... not one of those rooms had the scent of her smile.

He sat down in his room under the roof of the hotel, one that he rarely used.

No people, no view. Him and the mirror above the chest of drawers.

He took off his shirt slowly, as if he was removing a layer of identity.

In the mirror he saw a man whom he could not introduce to Milly.

The one who didn't manage when he had to explain.

How do you explain the silence?

How do you admit you were vulnerable but call it discretion?

He opened the drawer. He pulled out a small leather notebook. Old, torn at the corners.

Nobody knew how to write.

He was forgetting it himself.

But now... he began to write, without thinking.

"She didn't leave because of the truth.

She left because I didn't know how to tell her.

Because she trusted me with silence, and I answered her with absence.

She was looking at the man.

And I hid behind security so I wouldn't lose her — and that's exactly how I lost her."

He closed the notebook.

He didn't know if he would ever give her those words.

It doesn't even matter.

Because they were real.

The next day he got up early.

He went to the dock.

He sat in the same boat, with the same captain.

They didn’t say a word.

The captain looked at him, understanding.

— She?

— I don’t know where she is.

And I don’t even know if she wants me to know.

They sailed aimlessly.

At the place where they had first passed under the bridge, he stood for a while in silence.

He had that bracelet in his pocket.

Slowly he took the watch off his wrist. And tied the bracelet in place of the watch. Not as a souvenir.

But as a sign that he wasn’t measuring time for the first time.

He was measuring a feeling.

#### ***CHAPTER XI***

***Same City, Different Room***

That day, Mila also came back, but

not in the same hotel.

She didn't want the same streets.

Nor the same view from the window.

This time she chose a small hotel on the other side of the bridge.

She wasn't looking for a view of the Bosphorus.

The room overlooked the garden. In peace. And that was enough for her.

She put the suitcase down, sat on the bed and closed her eyes.

Sometimes you don't get back to someone.

You return to the place in yourself that you left unspoken.

At a small restaurant, she ordered lentil soup and lemonade.

No wine. Without looking across the table.

The waiter asked:

— Alone?

— For now, she answered.

It was as if she herself was in transit between the question and the answer.

Ortaköy smelled of spices and evening moisture from the Bosphorus.

She walked without a plan, like someone who is looking for something but doesn't know what. The stalls along the shore were full of handicrafts – bracelets, necklaces, wooden seagulls, candles in the shape of moon horns.

In one corner, a girl with a red scarf held her palms over a bowl full of thread bracelets.

— For luck, she said softly.

Mila smiled.

Took one - blue.

Similar to the one she already had. Or maybe identical. She wasn't sure.

She put it on her left wrist, paying without a word.

Then she moved on, towards the shore. The lights of the Boğazı Bridge illuminated the surface of the water as if they were writing messages to those who could read them.

At that moment...

A few streets away, in one of the small cafes overlooking the same bridge, Ibrahim was sitting alone.

His gaze was somewhere between the window glass and his own silence.

And then — through the reflection in the glass, someone passed by.

On the hand of that passer-by, a blue thread bracelet.

He flinched.

It wasn't Mila's hand.

Not even her step.

But the sight hurt him like the truth.

Some bracelets are not charms - they are memories that catch the eye of walkers.

He leaned back, closed his eyes for a second.

He didn't know where he was.

But he knew - she was there somewhere.

And he was hurt by that proximity where you are not allowed to approach.

In the evening, in room number 11, she opened a new notebook, which she bought that day and wrote:

 I'm back.

Not because of him.

Because of myself.

But if I meet him…

I won't pretend I don't know him.

I will tell him:

'Now I know how to keep quiet differently.'

#### ***CHAPTER XII***

***Again***

The day was warm. The air smelled of the streets she had passed once before, but now—she wasn't looking for anything.

She wore a white hat and sandals that tapped softly on the cobblestones.

In her hands - a paper bag with a book she bought at a stand in front of the mosque.

Nothing special. It was only the cover that attracted her.

She stopped in front of a small stall with sugared almonds.

She closed her eyes for a moment, inhaled the scent, opened them — and then...

...eyes met.

On the other side of the street.

He.

He was carrying a notebook under his arm and a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

There was no effect. There was no background music. Just two people who didn't know what to do with such a view.

He paused.

She too.

No one made the first move.

But they both stayed. And that was enough.

It was as if time had returned to correct what they had kept silent about.

She was the first to look down—but not as an escape.

As a choice.

She moved slowly towards him. No rush. No trepidation.

With the awareness that this moment is not the end, not the beginning, but a second chance to be real.

— Hello, she said quietly, as if the days of silence had not passed.

— Hello, he answered, not trying to hide the smile he had been waiting for a long time.

— You are...

— The same, he interrupted her.

— And I'm not, she said.

They were silent. Again.

But this time… it wasn't silence with the wall.

It was silence with the door.

And in front of them — two.

And the city that was waiting to bring them back together.

- Do you want to sit somewhere?

he asked, quietly, without imposing.

— If you know a place where they don't ask too much.

— There is one where they don't even ask me questions.

— Then lead.

The street led them slowly, without touching, but their step was even. It was as if the silence walked with them, no longer separating them.

The cafe was hidden in a courtyard between two buildings. Lots of shade, greenery, and wooden tables with rugs.

Without looking. No noise.

They sat down at a table by the wall. No order. The waiter nodded and brought two glasses of water and a coffee — as if he knew.

Mila looked at the table.

 Ibrahim at her.

And between them — nothing more to hide.

— Do you know where I was? she asked.

— No

— And you're not going to ask?

— No. I want to know that you're here now.

She paused. She looked at him.

— Then I'll tell you.

I was somewhere where no one asked me anything. And I liked that more than I wanted to admit.

— Sounds like a place you should visit when you need it.

— But I came back anyway.

— You came back, yes.

— You know?

— Yes. Because I stayed too.

They were silent as they drank their coffee.

No awkwardness.

No roles. Two people who know what it's like to look someone in the eye and no longer have to protect yourself.

She put down her cup.

— If you want to try again, know that we're not starting from scratch.

— We're starting from where you left off — and I couldn't stop you, because... I didn't even know you were going to leave.

— And now?

— I know better now.

She looked at him, and this time – she was the first to smile.

#### ***CHAPTER XIII***

***Two who know not to rush***

The sun had not yet reached the window, but the light was already warm.

She opened her eyes and lay still, looking at the ceiling.

She thought of their meeting today.

She didn't know what to call it – a meeting, a conversation, a fresh start?

It doesn't even matter.

She would call him peace.

That peace that doesn't come when everything becomes clear, but when you realize that you don't have to know everything to feel something as real.

In a cafe on the other side of the bridge, Ibrahim sat at the same time, with the same view of the Bosphorus.

He ordered two coffees.

He didn't know if he would come.

But he was not afraid to wait.

The waiter looked at him with a smile.

— Is Hanimefendi late today?

— "Maybe he won't come today,"

he said. But when it comes -

it will be on time.

Mila put on flat sandals. The same olive-colored dress. Her eyes weren't tired, but they weren't euphoric either. They were awake.

On her way out of the hotel, she stopped by the mirror.

She didn't check the appearance. She looked at herself.

And she nodded, like someone who had finally come to terms with herself.

— Two coffees? she asked when she approached him.

— I can drink one, but I left the other in case the world returns to its rightful place.

She sat down. Without a smile, but with presence.

— You know what is the most beautiful thing in everything?

she asked.

— What?

— Because we don't have to solve anything today.

— And that no one looks at the clock.

— And what can we talk about...

or to be silent.

— And that both mean the same thing.

They didn't talk about the past that morning.

They didn't talk about the future.

They drank coffee in the same rhythm.

Two who know not to rush, know how to stay.

Do you want to take a walk? she asked.

— Is that still being asked? - he answered with a smile.

And they started.

Down the streets that existed before them. Through the shadows of lilacs, past stalls with dried flowers, past a child selling oranges in a paper bag.

They didn't look at each other too much.

But they walked in the same rhythm — as if the body knows before words when it belongs next to someone.

At a corner, Ibrahim stopped.

— I used to come here when I was a kid. Back then, I thought adulthood was measured by the number of keys you carry in your pocket.

— And now?

— Now I think it's measured by... how many people you can let see you without hiding.

She looked at him tenderly but said nothing.

They reached a small gallery.

In front, an elderly artist sat, painting watercolors in the shadows of sycamore trees.

— Do you want me to draw you as two people who are not in a hurry?

He asked with a smile, eyes that saw more than colors.

Mila smiled. She looked at Ibrahim.

For the first time, she didn't ask for permission in his eyes.

— Draw us... as two who have learned to walk again.

Lightly.

They sat down.

Not close to each other, not too far.

Just enough so that the silence is not lost between them.

As the brush glided across the paper, the wind moved a lock of her hair.

He didn't move it.

She is.

And they both laughed.

For no reason.

Which was the best reason.

— "You have already met yourself," said the painter, more to himself than to them.

Mila smiled in confusion, and Ibrahim looked at him suspiciously.

— "I don't do portraits," he added quietly. — but sometimes, something just gets drawn.

They didn't ask.

They stood, while he wrapped the paper in which he had previously carefully wrapped the canvas.

— Carry it, you. He said to Ibrahim.

— In time, they will tell you what it is.

He thanked politely and accepted the package, without looking.

In their minds — it was another one of those things that happens in Istanbul, with no particular meaning.

It was only much later, when he was alone, when the day was ending, and when silence sat beside him like an old friend, that Ibrahim unrolled the paper.

The picture was simple.

Soft colors, subtle lines.

Mila.

In an olive-colored dress.

And his hand – recognizably his – holding hers.

And on her finger – a ring.

A moment that hasn't happened yet.

Or it is - but in some reality that they haven't reached yet.

It will keep the image.

They won't show it.

Not yet.

The picture lay on the table in front of him, unrolled and unframed, but bound in the silence it brought with it.

He looked at the lines of the fingers for a long time.

Into his own hand.

 Then into hers.

Into the ring he never bought.

In a moment that hasn't happened yet.

And maybe never will.

How did he know? - he asked himself.

But the truth is that artists don't know. They feel.

And now that feeling was sitting across from him, like an invisible guest, asking questions he wasn't ready for.

She is leaving soon.

A few more days - maybe less.

And everything could become one beautiful chapter.

Another city, another face he didn't keep.

Another hand he didn't hold long enough.

But he didn't want to be another one.

He knew he could no longer sit in the shadow of his own secrets.

He knew he would soon have to choose:

– or to open the door of his world to her

- or to forever observe it from a distance, like this picture, without touching it.

He was not afraid of what he was.

He was afraid of the question:

Is it too late already?

And as the Bosphorus whispered softly through the open window, Ibrahim knew—he couldn't let her go without finding out if she felt the same.

Maybe the artist painted the future.

And maybe - what the heart hid, but never said out loud.

#### ***CHAPTER XIV***

***Silence before departure***

The next day, Mila opened the suitcase, then closed it. And again.

She didn't know if she was actually getting ready to leave… or was creating the illusion of leaving even though she had bought a plane ticket.

She sat on the edge of the bed and thought about all the places they had been silent together.

About the terrace. About the smell of tea. About the street under the lilac.

About the window she opened first.

About the picture she never saw.

About the look that explained nothing to her, but said everything.

She wrote one sentence in her notebook:

***"Some conversations are not made with words, but they are remembered forever.”***

I'm not running, she told herself. I have to go back home.

She closed her eyes. She heard his voice in her head:

And maybe I'll wait for you.

Later in the day as she stood in line for coffee at a small shop in Galata, she had no plans for anything but that one sip of peace. The sun was low, the shadows stretched across the pavement, and the city noise turned into a whisper.

And then...

The doorbell rang.

A figure in a gray jacket and dark trousers entered.

She didn't notice him right away.

But the body knows before the mind. Her heart skipped a beat before their eyes met.

Ibrahim.

He saw her too.

He paused. He didn't take a step further. He didn't even blink.

And then... he nodded. Quietly. Almost imperceptible.

Like someone admitting defeat—or hope.

Mila looked down, but did not leave. She moved slightly to the side, as if making room.

And he approached.

— Where did you come from? Wherever I go, I run into you?

— I stopped for coffee. He answered in a serious tone.

— Me too. Mila smiled.

But he didn’t smile back.

—Can I join you?

Or are you silent again?

—Silence knows how to be sociable, she answered, looking out the window.

He sat down across from her, as if they were sitting on a chair that had been left unfinished somewhere between chapters.

—You know... he began quietly.

— Sometimes you hide something, not because you don’t want to be honest, but because you care. Maybe too much.

She didn’t answer right away. She just looked at him.

—That’s why I didn’t say who I was. Because you saw me as a man, as... me.

Silence descended between them, but this time – like a bridge.

Not like a wall.

And that’s why I missed you, he said, without needing to sound apologetic.

She stared into her cup, didn’t answer.

He looked down.

He touched the edge of the table, his gaze darting for a moment to the door of the café, as if he were measuring something inside.

— “You know, there’s a place…” he began, a little awkwardly, as if searching for the right word.

— “It’s not far. And it’s not touristy. I rarely take anyone there.”

She looked at him with slight hesitation. Still, she was already somewhere between trust and caution. He sensed it.

— “No, it’s not what you think.

No secrets, no symbols, no surprises.

—“A hill above the sea. And an old garden where you make yourself tea, all by yourself. No waiters, no menus, no noise.”

They looked at each other.

He added more quietly:

— “If you want to go.

 Without any ifs, ifs maybes.”

— Already... if you want.

She smiled.

— When? - she asked quietly.

— Tomorrow. In the morning.

 Say you're coming.And that's enough.

— Or if I don't come?

— Then I'll know you're not ready. And that's okay.

— And if I'm late?

— Then I'll be late too.

- he smiled... for the first time.

#### ***CHAPTER XV***

***The hill that preserves silence***

The morning came slowly, as if it wasn't even sure if he should wake up. The wind blew from the sea, gently but persistently, carrying the scent of pine and salt.

Ibrahim arrived earlier than he said. He couldn't help but come first.

The hill above the coast, known only to the locals, was obscured by greenery and oblivion.

The garden with old tables under vines seemed to be from another time. The tablecloth was of faded embroidery, the teapots multicolored and odd. Silence - complete.

He sat down at a table near the edge of the terrace, overlooking the sea that shimmered in the distance.

He placed two cups in front of him. He chose them himself, as if he wanted to believe in something.

He poured tea into one — himself. Not for her.

And he waited.

The minutes passed like drops through the sand of an hourglass.

 He wasn't checking his phone. He wasn't looking at the track.

He just sat there. And silent with the wind.

And then, somewhere between breath and thought, he felt a presence.

He turned slowly.

Mila was standing on the path, in a dress that swayed slightly, with her hair gently blown around her face by the wind. She didn't say anything. She came and sat down.

She looked at the empty cup in front of her.

"Look, she's intact," she said quietly, with a slight smile.

— It is. I knew you wanted to fill it yourself, he answered.

And handed her the teapot.

They were silent for a while. The tea was strong, warm, and tasted of peace.

— "This silence... is not unpleasant," she said after a while.

— Some places teach people that they don't always have to speak.

They were looking at the sea.

The world had no intention of rushing. Neither are they.

She took a sip of her tea, closed her eyes and smiled.

— You know... I think I've arrived after all.

— "You did," he answered.

He took another sip, then set the cup down on the table and looked into it, no longer like a man hiding—but like someone who knows it's time.

— Dear...

She didn't interrupt him.

She looked up.

She was there—wide awake for what was to come.

— I didn't explain everything to you well.

— I am not adept at outbursts of emotion.

— But…

— I didn't tell you who I was... because I didn't know what that role meant when I was with you.

He continued slowly, without weight, but with clarity.

— The hotel, the company, people who call me Mr. Yilmaz, all that... is part of my everyday life.

— But you were not part of that world. You were someone who said what you see when you look into the water. And for the first time I wanted to be an ordinary man.

Not the director. Not the heir.

Already someone who can give you a hand in the boat and be silent with you on the bench.

She nodded her head, not breaking the silence.

— And then what happened in front of the hotel. And I knew I couldn't hide anymore. Not from you.

Not from myself.

— I thought you didn't want to confuse me. Or scare. Or lose.

— And all of that is true, but most of all... I didn't want you to think that you were part of someone's game.

And you didn't. From the very beginning... you were the one thing I didn't plan for.

He paused. For the first time, there was vulnerability in his voice.

— I didn't know it was possible for someone to... sneak into someone's life like that. No request.

Without question...to be there.

And then, when he leaves - it's as if he took the air with him.

Mila looked at him for a long time. Then she said quietly:

— And do you know what I thought?

— That you are not the man from the beginning. If you were someone else... And anyway,

 I wanted to meet you.

She shrugged.

— Maybe the shores are different, but the view from the water is the same.

Ibrahim smiled.

— Maybe...

She smiled back, even though she knew she was traveling tomorrow.

She didn't want to tell him.

She didn't want parting.

For her, this was parting.

She wanted to leave quietly without a word.

And he...he will soon forget her.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird called.

And between them - peace.

The one that comes when all the cards are laid on the table, and nothing is hidden anymore.

#### ***CHAPTER XVI***

***In a place she wasn't looking for***

Nothing greeted her as she had expected - calm, almost silent.

No golden sunsets over the Bosphorus, no warm wind carrying the scent of the sea.

Streets she knew by heart, people who didn't ask her anything, and a city that still seemed all too real to her.

She tried to get back into the rhythm. To be the old her, drinking coffee in her favorite café. Going to work.

Mila who doesn't count the windows of the villas along the Bosphorus.

But something was different.

 In her.

She no longer saw the same woman in the mirror.

She didn't know if she missed him... or who she was next to him.

Days passed. There was no message. She didn't even write to him.

Pride? Fear?

Or that famous one,

If he cared, he'd know where to find me.

It was Saturday morning.

She was standing in a small antique store where she often bought old books. That day, she didn't even know why she was there, she didn't need a book. It's just... she was.

The bell above the door rang as someone opened it.

She didn't even turn around. She was looking at the cover of a book without focus.

And then she heard a voice.

Quietly, as if afraid to spoil it:

— They told me that they make the best coffee here...

but I still came for something more important.

It was as if time had collapsed.

She turned slowly. And he was standing there.

In a white shirt and with eyes that were looking for her.

She didn't say anything. The heart was pounding, the throat was tight.

She didn't know whether to hug him, hit him, or just...stand.

— Istanbul is beautiful, he said.

But it didn't make sense without you.

Her eyes watered. And before she could think of an answer, he added:

— This time, I won't let you leave without an explanation.

— If I have to, I'll stay here. Tell me...

Is there still room for me in your day?

They stood like that, two people who weren't looking for each other, but still found each other.

In the next moment, as if everything was happening right next to her

- Mila was already outside, and Ibrahim was walking beside her.

They didn't talk right away.

Neither of them knew how to start.

Or they did - but they didn't want to be the first to break the silence.

In the café around the corner, the one with a view of the Fortress, they sat down at a table in the shade, under an old chestnut tree.

The waiter looked at them, nodded, and left, as if he too knew - this was no ordinary meeting.

Ibrahim was the first to speak.

— I knew you would leave. And I knew you would try to forget.

— I had to ... go home.

That was the only excuse that came to her mind at that moment.

— I was afraid you would leave if you found out who I was.

He paused. And I was right.

Mila looked him straight in the eye.

— Not because you own the hotel.

— Not because of what happened at the entrance.

— But because you hid it from me.

— Because you gave yourself to me, then backed out when I was halfway there.

He was silent, but this time—there was no escaping the scene.

— “You know what’s ironic?” she asked.

— I met you as a man.

— And I fell in love.

— And then you turned me away when you became someone else in front of everyone.

He gave her a look that was vulnerable, helpless for the first time. — I didn’t know I could still feel this way. And I didn’t know I wanted to stay… just because you were here. She looked away. She looked at the cup in front of her, then back at him.

— I'm not looking for a fairy tale.

But I'm looking for the truth.

And a person who won't run away when I look through the walls.

— I will not run away. If you let me stay.

At that moment, a little girl passed them with a balloon in her hand, and the wind blew the scent of summer between them.

Mila said quietly:

— For now... stay.

But without disappearing.

He nodded. He did not extend his hand to her. He stayed.

And that was enough.

The silence that followed was neither heavy nor awkward. She was like a bridge between them - thin but strong.

After a long silence, Ibrahim looked away, as if searching for words that would not sound like a call or a plea.

— I can't stay long.

The hotel is... my life.

People are waiting for me.

 Duties they can't do without me.

I came... because I couldn't not come.

Not to say.

She was silent. But her eyes betrayed her - she was listening with every part of herself.

— I'm not looking for an answer now. I had to tell you... that you exist in me. From day one.

He paused, then quietly added:

— If you ever decide that you don't want to leave anymore...

Istanbul is waiting for you.

And I... even more.

He got up slowly, without drama.

As someone who knows that he said everything he needed to - and that decisions are made in silence, not in words.

Mila remained seated.

She didn't stop him.

She didn't get up after him.

She remained looking in the direction he had gone, while the chestnut leaves above her whispered something that she herself began to feel:

Maybe sometimes, in order to stay - you have to leave first.

#### ***CHAPTER XVII***

***What if I stay? What if I leave?***

Standing in front of the mirror in the room she once called home.

Her hands were moving, but her thoughts were in chaos.

She was trying to put things in the suitcase, but not a single thing would fall into place.

It was as if they weren't sure where they belonged either.

On the table - a cup with the inscription:

“Hayat bir days, oh yes bugundur.”

In the cup - coffee that she didn't even drink.

In her - a thought that she did not know how to say:

What if it was my day and I let it pass?

She tried to console herself with common sense.

Well, it wasn't a real relationship…

We weren't even really together... Just a few days, a few glances, a few evenings.

But the heart said:

Yes, but you were mostly yourself. And mostly mercury.

She was looking out the window.

 The city breathed its own rhythm. People were passing by, vehicles were buzzing, the Nišava wind was carrying the first traces of autumn.

And she... she was standing. In place.

The phone was on the table. Ibrahim's number – uncalled.

Written message - deleted.

I can't.

And maybe that's why I have to.

She was fighting a war inside herself. Two women sat at the same table - one who stays where it's safe, and the other who knows that real things only happen when you stop choosing safety.

And just when she thought reason would prevail, there was a soft ping of the phone.

A message.

From him?

The message was on the screen.

One sentence.

— I'm not asking you to stay. I want you to know - I am.

He didn’t call.

Mila read the message several times. To herself.

Out loud.

And again.

And it sounded different each time. He didn’t ask for anything.

He didn’t ask questions.

He didn’t offer any solutions.

But he said the most important thing – that he was here.

 Not to play a game.

 Not to try to keep her with false promises. If he stayed.

Maybe not in the same city, but in the same place – when it came to her. She didn’t know whether to cry or laugh. Instead, she sat down on the floor next to her suitcase.

Could it be that one message confused me more than our entire stay in Istanbul?

But the truth was simple. She missed him. And it didn’t matter who he was anymore. The director, the owner, a mysterious man with a history she didn’t yet know. What mattered was what he did to her.

How he looked at her. How he didn’t rush her.

How he knew when to be silent and when to say: I’ll be there?

Her gaze fell on the ceramic cup.

The one with the inscription about the day.

Maybe today is still today.

She picked up the phone. Wrote a message.

Deleted it.

She wrote again.

Finally she sent:

— Where are you now?

Her phone rang before she could even close the lid of her suitcase.

— Here. In front of your building.

She was speechless.

She hadn’t expected that.

Not yet. Maybe tomorrow.

Maybe someday. Maybe... when she figured out what she wanted to tell him.

She jumped up, went to the window and moved the curtain.

Down below, by the streetlight, he was standing.

In his shirt, his collar turned up and his hands in his pockets.

And he was looking towards her window. Exactly. As if he knew.

As if he had always known.

He didn’t write any more. He didn’t call.

He remained there - with the same silence that spoke louder than words.

And as she watched his silhouette through the glass, she knew:

If he went down now, he wouldn't come back.

She didn't even bring her jacket. She put on her ballet flats and went down the stairs, skipping two at a time.

Her heart was pounding as if she knew this wasn't a rehearsal - it was a premiere.

The door to the building suddenly opened, and the air smelled of evening rain and something familiar, Turkish, unobtrusive.

He turned away and said nothing.

He spread his arms - not too wide. Just as much as she needed.

She stopped two steps away from him.

— Why did you come? - she asked quietly.

— Let me ask you... do you miss me or did you run away so as not to admit that someone found you?

She was silent.

— I'm not asking you to stay right away.

I'm not asking for anything now.

I offer you what already exists.

 - He looked at her, seriously, but gently.

 — You know... what doesn't have to be explained.

Mila took one step.

Sufficient.

He hugged her.

And all the words they didn't say - they stood there, between the palms that finally found the place where they belong.

His shirt smelled like the wind from the Bosphorus.

To everything that was left unsaid. She closed her eyes.

— Do you know how many times I imagined this moment? - she whispered.

— And do you know how many times I wished him to be real? - he answered breathlessly.

They didn't move.

People passed by, the night breathed around them, but it was no longer Niš.

It was a continuation of the world in which they began to exist for each other.

— And what are we going to do now? – she asked, still leaning against his chest.

— Now... we can start from the beginning.

But no acting. No hidden truths. No windows that we close when we feel fear.

— You know it's not easy?

— Yes. But if you're the one opening the windows... then I'm the one staying.

Mila looked up.

She didn't smile. She didn't even cry. She nodded. Lightly. It seems to agree with the wind, with uncertainty, with everything that cannot be packed into safe sentences.

Because some stories never end.

They ask us to believe them

#### ***CHAPTER XVIII***

***Return without Return***

In Niš, the morning was ordinary—but she knew.

The moment when life changes is not always announced with a spectacle. Sometimes it arrives quietly, at the station, with a suitcase in hand and a look that says:

Let's start life.

Ibrahim did not rush her. He opened the car door and left room for a decision.

She sat down. Without a word. Without hesitation.

On the plane, he held her hand as she looked out the window.

The silhouette of Istanbul appeared through the clouds—and it was no longer just a city. It was a sign.

Everything in the hotel looked the same, but nothing was the same.

The staff greeted them with a gentle smile.

No one asked anything. Everyone knew.

That evening, he invited her into a special room.

A wrapped painting was waiting for them on the table, and next to it – a box.

— You wanted to know why I was silent... - he said.

— Because you were afraid? - she asked quietly.

— Because I already knew you then. And I knew... He didn't continue.

He opened the picture.

In it - he and she, painted in a moment that didn't exist yet.

As he puts the ring on her finger.

 She stopped.

She couldn't breathe.

She looked at the picture, then at him. He was already on his knees, gently, with that look that didn't demand commitment.

— I know I'm not an ordinary man. But you... you made me want to be simple.

Only yours.

— Do you want to...?

He didn't finish.

He didn't have to.

— I will, she said.

Without hesitation. Without fear. Without turning back. And the Bosphorus was silent that night.

***Because some loves don't need to be retold. They have to live.***

***THE END***

#### ***About the author***

My name is Ana.C and I come from Serbia - a country where love is remembered even when it is not spoken.

I do not write from a profession, but from a feeling.

My stories are not perfect, but they are honest. They are not there to explain the world, but to preserve what is valuable in it - silence, a view, a moment.

Books are born from silence, from those moments that change us and from words that find us when we least expect them.

“Drops of July on the Bosphorus”

 is a novel about love, time and what remains unsaid - while the heart still understands everything.

Because I believe that we don't write some stories - they write us.

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