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Young Girl's Novel

by

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B.A., Middle East Technical University, 2012

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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A Diverse and Realistic Journey in Fiction

Introduction

The world expands with human stories. The population increases day by day on earth. Soon there will be 8 billion people on earth; that means 8 billion stories. I believe that each one of them is worthwhile, and because of that I want to tell my story in this young adult novel.

I am a 31-year-old woman who grew up in Turkey. When I moved to the U.S. from Turkey for my MA degree at Hollins, I realized that I am a minority in the country. That feeling was very strange and new for me. So, I felt the need to write down this story.

Turkey's higher education system is similar to that of the United States. For example, I graduated with an undergraduate degree from Middle East Technical University, a college organized by the American government. Courses there are taught in English and there are many American professors who work in it. Thus, there are many graduate and undergraduate degrees, and many Turkish higher education students enroll in colleges in the United States. I am one of those students, and I have many friends and family who live in States. I wanted to subject my protagonist Merve to this inner and outward journey because I am familiar with many people like her.

Writing down a diverse piece of young adult fiction was very important for me for two reasons. One of them is that young adult fiction has never been written in my native language, Turkish, by a Turkish writer. Young adult fiction is a new concept in Turkish literature. Most of the fiction is translated from other languages. Therefore, Turkish people have a hard time empathizing with characters and stories.

The other reason for writing the story of a Turkish college student in the States is that it is a great opportunity to introduce Turkish culture to English speakers. Political, cultural, and economic affairs have been very intense, especially in the fall of 2019, between Turkey and the

United States. Being a minority in the States is not the best feeling, especially now. That's why I wanted to write Merve's story in my thesis.

Merve is a 19-year-old girl who is an undergraduate student in the States. The novel starts with her first time in the States. She encounters the college culture, dorm culture, and through those, American culture. While she acknowledges new cultures, she also explores her identity. She needs to adapt to all of them, turning herself from tourist to resident.

According to Nisi Shawl, I am a transcultural writer; I am a Turkish girl who is from Turkey and writes in English, growing up in Turkey, then moving to the United States to study, day by day trying to adapt to American culture and language. Because I was already "the Other," I thought this was the best thing to reflect upon in my novel. I see myself in Merve's character.

In her article "Appropriate Cultural Appropriation," Nisi Shawl explains being a tourist and guest in her book *Writing the Other* on page 90.

"A tourist becomes a Guest if the locals like what they see and ask her to return. But before taking on the Tourist role, a writer or reader will have no contact with said locals. When first learning about and incorporating aspects of another's culture, then, we ought to act like the best of all possible Tourists: to stay alert and observant, to watch for the ways of our own background influences how we interpret our surroundings. We ought to remember that we have baggage. We ought to be prepared to pay for what we receive ... We ought to be honest about the fact that we're outsiders. And since we're in an unfamiliar setting we shouldn't be ashamed of occasionally feeling lost. We ought to swallow our pride at such times and ask for help, ask for directions."

Why Young Girl's Novel?

In 2019, being a college student is a difficult situation anywhere in the world. It is very scary to leave the protected, safe family home and take on the responsibility of yourself. Being a

college student means managing your money, being responsible for your personal life, and being responsible for your academic life. Moreover, you need to manage the place to live and what you eat.

My protagonist Merve is a 19-year-old Turkish girl, the oldest child in her family. Her family is getting richer and richer because of Turkey's political and economic changes after the 2002 elections. His father is in the construction business in Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey. He sees Merve as an investment, which is why he sends her to the States to study economics. Although Merve knows her father's dreams, he has no positive or negative opinion about her. So, Merve moves to the States.

The main reason for titling my thesis *Young Girl's Novel* is that Merve's journey ends with her writing a book. At the end of the thesis, she collects her experiences and writes them down as a novel and in that decision, she chooses her own path.

Starting a new life in a different country is already very difficult. Starting a new life at college is even more difficult. Merve moves into a college dorm and has to learn new rules and meet new people, which all seem strange to her. She keeps comparing the new to her old life. At first, she has no friends in college. Her roommate is unfriendly. Moreover, Merve does not trust her ability to speak and listen in English. When she starts mastering English, she gains self-respect.

At home in Turkey, there are family problems that she does not understand, nor that she wants to understand. Her father is despotic and her mother is very quiet and lacks agency. While Merve is away at school, her little brother begins to get out of control, then starts bullying her mother. At one point, Merve does not want to hear any news from home, which makes her feel that she has no place that she feels safe or that she can call home.

Merve has another problem in the middle of the first term: she hates her economics major. She discovers creative writing, and decides she'd rather major in that. With the help of her new college friends, she starts reading and writing. Her roommate Emily suggests that Merve change her major, but Merve knows her family won't approve. If she says her dream is to change her major and write books, her father might disown her.

Merve has many obstacles in her life. As a writer, I had to solve Merve's problems. I followed Joseph Campbell's way, because Merve is also a hero on a journey. She comes from a strange place, changed countries and position. The most appropriate way for me to tell this story was modeled after Campbell's book, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I was inspired by Campbell's theory, the hero's journey, because Merve's journey also has inner and outward motivations.

The steps of the hero's journey are the Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid, the Crossing of the First Threshold, the Belly of the Whale, the Road of Trials, the Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, the Ultimate Boon, Refusal of the Return, the Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, the Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of the Two Worlds, and Freedom to Live.

I did not want to use all of the steps in my novel. It needed to be realistic and current, so my work of fiction does not involve goddesses or magic fights. And no one would give a magic elixir to my protagonist. In Jennifer Brannen's article "All About Realistic Fiction for Teens," she defines realistic fiction as "real life set to fiction." I didn't want fantastic elements in my novel. Brannen continues the definition of realistic fiction:

"It's about anything that can happen in real life—good, bad, and in-between. It's real emotions and behaviors in real settings and encompasses the experiences of characters from all different backgrounds. It can also include extremes, both positive and negative, from high living with a focus on wealth, designer clothes, and private schools to the

darker extremes of drug use, family breakdowns, and sexual assault. The only limit is reality, which, depending on one's point of view, is either a jump-off point into the fantastical or just where it starts to get interesting all on its own.”

In my opinion the change of the protagonist is the best way to immerse readers in fiction. Change is the undeniable fact of human life. So, Merve must face cultural, religious, physical, and racial obstacles in the novel, and I needed to make those obstacles be both inner and outward, which needed to be realistic.

In Campbell's theory, the first step is the Call to Adventure. My hero, Merve, is called by her father to study in an American college. She accepts the call, and the story starts with the flight to Arizona. The second step is the Crossing of the First Threshold, when the hero first enters the physical world that is outside the hero's home. Merve moves into a dorm, which is new to her, as are her college classes. At this point, the hero is confronted by a guardian which is a dangerous presence sent to test the hero's resolve to move forward. This guardian is Abdullah, a very religious Turkish boy sent to college by a religious order. Abdullah's attitude is a huge test for Merve. Even though he is Turkish, she is not familiar with people like him. Ahmet sexually assaults her, and Ahmet's friend Meryem takes Merve to the religious order's meeting.

The next step in the hero's journey is the Belly of the Whale, which is a metaphor for the hero's position. Merve is swallowed both physically and psychologically by a metaphorical whale. She needs to fight to get out of the belly to find her courage and personal truths. After the religious meeting, Merve feels used by Meryem. Ahmet's physical and verbal sexual assault took her into the belly of the whale. She is in a different psychological place.

The Road of Trials is another part of Campbell's and Merve's journey in which the hero finds him or herself faced with many challenges. While Merve confronts challenges, she needs to meet spiritual guides. She meets Emily and Emily's friends, who give a hand to Merve both

physically and psychologically when they invite Merve into their intellectual world. These friends are here to remind Merve who she really is and help her in her journey. At this stage the guardians need to ask the hero what his or her real purpose is in their journey.

After meeting the guardians and trials, the hero needs to meet with the goddess who is all things: life-giving, life-destroying, generous. According to Campbell, this goddess represents all of the things that can be possible in life. Because Merve is a hetero female, I wanted to create sexual tension between her and the goddess, who I made male in Professor Michael, or Mike. Mike gives her a chance to study creative writing and reading, and he reminds Merve what her purpose is. Merve holds every possible opportunity: choose to change her life with his help or not. If she chooses Mike's way, she will be rewarded. If she denies the chance and goes back to where she started, she will be punished.

Merve starts to communicate with her high school love Aytekin, who lives in Istanbul; this confuses her purpose. Because of his attraction to her, she wants to quit college in America. When she returns to Istanbul for winter break, her mind is set to not come back to college. Campbell calls this step Rescue from Without. The hero is unable to get away from the place he or she arrived. After Merve finds out that Aytekin is not loyal to her, everything changes. Aytekin is in a relationship with Merve's ex-best friend Sumru, who exposes the affair. The Hero realizes that there is already a life to be lived in the place she has been trying to put down roots, so Merve must get back to America.

The next and most exciting step is the Crossing of the Return Threshold. It deals with the Hero's journey home. Merve starts questioning what she is doing in Istanbul and what is worth staying for. She realizes her home is now Arizona, not Istanbul. The hero's job is to teach these things to the people she left behind to remind them that there are greater things in the world. Therefore, Merve writes down her journey, starting with college, and leaves it for her parents to

read it. She adds a note to them about how they are choosing to live their life and that she has chosen to live her life her own way.

The last part of this journey is called Freedom to Live. The hero no longer needs to fight but relaxes and allows what may come. The hero's freedom to live as he or she chooses is the prize for getting through the fight. From now on, Merve has the freedom to live in the States. She has fought with herself and found her reason for living the way she has chosen. She also had to fight with her past, her old love and her family. She is free and ready for what future will bring.

I was inspired by my own college days and my friends' memories while I wrote Merve's story. For example, the dervish order is a serious threat to Turkish people in foreign countries. The order needs people to spread their words. It seems religious, but they have wacky ways and rules. Writing about this was gratifying in that I could warn young people what it may bring to them. That's why I am writing about them symbolically. Writing *Young Girl's Novel* was a great experience.

Context

Young Girl's Novel is realistic, diverse young adult fiction. Young adult literature is a controversial audience to define, and it is difficult because my protagonist is a 19-year-old girl. She is not under 18, and she is not full-grown adult. According to Imogen Russel William's article in *The Guardian*, young adult literature "is more likely to deal frankly with sex, tackle challenging issues and adult relationships, and feature swearing." However, not all young adult literature contains these things.

To solve this problem of what defines young adult literature, we have to look widely at it. Regina Brooks has a wide definition, which my thesis fits. Brooks defines my novel as crossover YA fiction in her book *Writing Great Books for Young Adults*:

“A lot of people in the publishing industry believe that confusion about what constitutes YA lit is heightened by the success of some titles known in the industry as ‘crossovers.’ Publishing houses generate additional revenue from some books by marketing them to both adult and YA readers, thus crossing over from one audience to another.”

I would categorize my thesis as crossover young adult fiction, so Merve’s age and her college adventures are not an issue. Moreover, the inclusion of sexual assault is an acceptable topic to cover.

My thesis is also diverse fiction, because Merve is a minority in the States. She is Middle Eastern, a foreigner college student, and she has deep problems with her identity, so she needs to face this problem, the main source of which are her parents’ attitudes. Merve has little connection with her parents. Moreover, they complain to her about each other. Merve used to have a close relationship with her little brother, but after she left the country, he changed and started causing trouble in school. Later on, Merve learns her mother is lonely and suffering from psychological problems and is unable to be Merve’s caretaker.

When I wrote Merve’s story, I was inspired by Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Katniss sees her mother as useless; she is depressed because of the loss of her husband. Katniss was very angry with her mother and from trying to stand in as a mother figure to her sister. That’s why I wrote that the relationship between Merve and her brother was a close one at one point.

In the article “A Mom-Shaped Hole: Psychoanalysis and the Dystopian Maternal,” Jennifer Mitchell also talks about Katniss’ relationship with her mother. “Notably, Katniss neither takes over for her mother nor identifies as a kind of hybrid parental figure that would bridge the gap between lost father and ‘lost’ mother.” Like Katniss, Merve takes over for her

parents with her brother. And after her affair with Aytakin, Merve does not tell her mother anything. She is grown up and does not need consolation anymore.

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Young Girl's Novel – Idil Hafizoglu

Chapter 1

The bright light streaming through the plane window dazzled my eyes. I was starting to wake up, and my eyes were adjusting to the light. Yes, I remembered: I was on a plane, I was going to America, and yes, we would be landing in a short time. I was calm; only the window shade the flight attendant opened bothered me. There was nothing to worry about. Soon my eyes

would get used to the sunlight, and I'd get rid of the sleepiness. At that time, everything would be fine.

“Are you awake?” my mother asked.

Yes, I thought. Probably. I thought I was awake. Why else would I remember why I was going to America, and why my heart beat in my stomach?

“Yes,” I said.

Really, I asked myself, why I was going? Wasn't it possible to go to a university in my own country? Was it necessary for me get on this plane where the sun stuck in my eyes like a knife? Why wasn't it possible to study in a university in Istanbul, close to my home, that did not require being on a plane?

It wasn't possible. Because Istanbul, which for 19 years had been my home, wasn't my home anymore. My friends had forsaken me; my family was about to crumble. I had to leave them before they let me down. If I ran so far away, no one could hurt me, or could they?

“What time is it?” I asked.

“In Turkey or in America?” Mum replied.

“In Arizona.”

“Eight in the morning. We will be landing in 45 minutes; go to the bathroom and wash your face and hands. You look a mess.”

Thanks for the observation, Mum. I took my makeup bag and turned toward the awful-smelling bathroom. I never thought that plane toilets reeked before now. Earlier I loved everything about the flight, so I didn't notice the bad smell that seemed to have grown. My eye makeup was as messy as Mum said, and I left most of my foundation on my mini pillow.

Invisible fists intermittently punched my stomach as I sat back down. Sarp was as excited as the first moment he got on the plane, and was looking back and forth at the view from the window and the screen in front of him.

“Hey sis, we’re almost in Arizona,” he cried out when he saw me return, unpreventable excitement in his voice. If I opened my mouth, I’d feel another invisible punch in my stomach, so I confined my response to a smile. He continued to explain in a loud voice what he saw below while hitting my mother's arm repeatedly.

Leaning to one side, I tried to see the bald head of my father who was sitting three rows ahead of us. I could barely see his head, which was looking left and right. I think the poor passenger sitting next to him had been taken hostage by my father’s conversation. In this large plane, the passenger was seated next to the talky Turkish contractor. There are some in worse situations than me, I realized. I’d rather the punches than my father talking.

I leaned on my mother's shoulder and inhaled her perfume mixed with her own special scent. This time the smell couldn't give me peace; today I apparently had a problem with smells. The plane started to descend, and I closed my eyes again trying to sleep, but the fists in my stomach wouldn't let me. Today was supposed to be the first day of my new life.

It was the first week of August, and while starting a new life by throwing myself in the middle of the desert may have looked like defeat, I came here to change things.

It was not our family's first trip abroad, so I didn’t understand why my 11-year-old brother Sarp got that excited. My mum as well stretched her neck out like a swan to look at shapes on the land below with excitement. Was it the thought of leaving me, or the idea of seeing a desert in the middle of summer that they found so exciting?

As I could tell from the movement of his bald head, my father was also excited.

I was numb, except for the punches.

If today was the first day of your new life, though, how would you feel?

The feeling of drowsiness didn't die out when we landed, but the punches in my stomach disappeared; I didn't feel anything anymore, even the scorching heat outside or freezing cold indoors. I couldn't pull myself together. I didn't know whether I was suffering from jetlag or if this was me adapting to the climate, but as soon as possible, I wanted to be done with the day. After settling into a hotel room near the campus, I fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2

The first week of my new life wasn't so different. We dragged along, accompanying my father. My father's sloppy English caused a commotion while we handled school and dormitory applications. In my father's presence, my mother and I had no right to speak. My numbness was slowly fading, but now I wanted my family to leave immediately. I wanted to be alone with myself, and for the first time in my 19 years, I wanted to stand on my own legs. But I was still waiting quietly and agreeing with every word they said.

"Merve, you don't need to buy a pillow," my father said. "I'm sure your dorm room will have one."

Now this was the final straw. It was a *pillow*, and why was it his concern?

"Okay, dad, thanks," I said.

In two days, they were going to leave. Just two days. If I was patient enough, these two days would pass quickly. And then? Then, I didn't know. But at least tonight I was going to stay in my dorm room for the first time. It would be my first night alone in a foreign country, in a building full of strangers.

But the dormitory, which should have been full of strangers, was actually empty because it was Saturday. Inside it was freezing. The white fluorescent light and the milky brown carpets made the building feel emptier and more charmless. My room was a double room, but my

roommate had not arrived yet. My suitcases and shopping bags were piled in the middle of the room, and my mom was looking at the dust on the tables.

“Would you leave it alone, Mum? I'll clean up if my room is dusty!” I yelled. I regretted it instantly, but it was too late. She looked at me with tearful eyes, clearly shaken, and started to cry.

I endured the whole week, and it was my mother I snapped at, not my father. Bravo me! My father entered the room then.

“See, what more do you want? You have a beautiful dorm room. Don't you find a flaw in here, and don't forget where you came from!” he said.

He didn't know what just happened between me and Mum, and even if he knew, he wouldn't have said anything. He was just sharing his thoughts.

“Okay, dad,” I said. “Mum, I'm fine. Don't worry about me.” I tried to hug her, but before I could, Sarp wrapped his arms around her. He was angry.

“Sis, you made Mum cry!” he said. “I won't ever make her cry while you are gone.”

“What are you doing, Nuray?” Dad snapped at her. “Pull yourself together.”

I'd never seen this man be helpful even once! I apologized, hugging my mother. She had stopped crying, but she looked nervous.

“Okay, Osman,” she said to my dad, “Let's go now.” Without making eye contact with me, she said they were going to pick me up for breakfast at 9 a.m., and they left in a hurry.

My room was actually quite a large double room, but it didn't have a bathroom. I had a spacious work desk, a bookshelf, and a closet. It was as large as my old room at home, but I was going to share this one with another person. I tried to imagine my roommate: I wondered if they were going to come with big suitcases like me? Maybe they would be the type of person who never even stayed in the dormitory. What if they smelled? If they smelled bad, I couldn't stand it.

I reached for my backpack, and I pulled my little notebook from it. In Turkey, it was 7 in the morning, the sun already starting to scorch the dirty streets of Istanbul. People would not have started complaining about the humidity yet, because the gentle breeze from the Bosphorus cooled and relaxed them. I turned to the last pages of the book, and I wrote down five names and phone numbers: Sumru, Pelin, my grandmother, my aunt, and my uncle, Kenan, who lived in Idaho. I had left my old phone to my brother, and I bought a new phone with an American area code, 480, for myself. I recorded the names one by one in my new phone, and I sent the same message to my grandmother, aunt, and uncle.

Hi, it's me. Merve. This is my new number. I'll call as soon as possible. Xoxo

It wouldn't matter if I saved Sumru's and Pelin's numbers, because we hadn't spoken in a year, but I saved them anyway. I checked Instagram and saw that there was a new photo of them posed in a crowded night club with a group of friends. Under the photo was written, "As usual..." If we were still talking, would I call them now? Sumru would never wake up to pick up the phone at this hour, though. Pelin would elaborately explain what they did last night and would never ask what I was doing. I decided that I didn't miss them.

But I didn't delete their numbers from my phone.

I fell asleep while looking at Instagram, without having put any sheets on the bed. I woke up to my mother's insistent calls—they were waiting for me downstairs.

When I got downstairs they asked me how my first night had been and if I had a chance to settle in. I answered the questions in a fake cheerful manner and talked about my uncle's visit; he was to visit us in Arizona that day. My uncle was basically another version of my father, but living abroad, and we didn't get along well. In the eyes of my relatives I was always "silent Merve." I was fine with that because I didn't have to talk with anyone.

I had to listen to my uncle's thick voice for two days. At the end of the second day, we said our goodbyes in my dormitory lobby. I expected Mum to cry, but I was very surprised when Sarp cried, too. When I hugged him, my eyes burned. Dad was the one to disrupt the moment.

"Study hard," he said. "I don't want a single poor grade. We paid a fortune for the school. Don't you dare not appreciate it."

The other students that filled the lobby with suitcases in their hands stared at us. I guessed it was because we were all crying, and I felt embarrassed.

When they left in their rental car, I felt a weight on my chest lifted. But when I climbed the stairs to my room, I felt guilty for feeling relieved. They were my family, but they were also the ones who left me here.

I was grappling with these thoughts and didn't notice that my bedroom door was already open. I barged into the room. Two people dressed in black had their backs turned to me, and they were looking at something. On the floor was a black suitcase and a black backpack. For the first time since I arrived in America, I was going to speak English without someone by my side. Thinking about the words I was going to say, I started to sweat. They turned and saw me. One was a girl, and the other a guy with long, straight black hair. Their faces were white, and their jeans, T-shirts, and boots were black. With an emotionless voice, the girl said, "Hello, are you my roommate?"

My mouth was too dry to speak. I felt like I did in my English language classes, pouring sweat. After a few seconds I managed to say, "Yes. My name is Merve. I'm from Turkey."

The guy seemed to be smiling.

"Wow, Turkey?" he said. "So remote. I'm John."

I stuck out my hand, but he didn't shake it.

"I'm Emily," the girl said in the same tone, also not shaking my hand.

In the tense atmosphere in the room, I realized that they were keeping an eye on me as I went about my business. I couldn't decide what to do, so I dabbled with my phone. They continued their conversation; they were checking to see if their friends were coming to join them. I guessed this was not their first year of college. I was sure Emily was my roommate, but who was John? Were they related?

I was relieved when they left the room without speaking to me again, but my eyes were drawn to their bags. They smelled of smoke, a smell very familiar to me because many people smoked in Turkey, including my father. Closing the door they left open, I started to listen to the laughs and conversations coming from the hallway. I could mostly understand what they were saying, and that made me feel more comfortable. But I was still nervous about talking. I fell asleep with my clothes on, listening to the conversations in the hallway.

Chapter 3

I dreamed I was in high school again. Me, Sumru, Pelin, and Aytekin were talking and laughing in the hallway.

Suddenly, Aytekin turned to me and said, "Why are you laughing? I didn't make a joke." Sumru and Pelin started to laugh more.

"Look at her, she's still here," said Pelin, her laughter rising.

I remembered it all over again. For two years, I liked Aytekin. For a year and a half I hid this from my closest friends, Pelin and Sumru, but when Aytekin broke up with his girlfriend and started to hang out with us, I couldn't hide it anymore. We went to school, the movies, and even shopped together. Aytekin knew I liked him, but he was playing with me like a cat teasing a mouse.

When the results of the university exams were announced, and I didn't get in anywhere, the three of them became increasingly distant. They got into the same private university.

Although I also wanted to go to that university, my score was not high enough. I cried for days, but I also knew I hadn't studied much during the year. Even though they started talking to me less and less, they became more important than my future plans. I constantly followed their social media to see what they were doing and where they were going, and I wondered why they did not call me.

I did not understand my father's insistence on studying abroad—I had never thought about it. Ever since I was born, my dad did not seem to truly care for our family; he was just a person who brought money and restlessness to our home when he returned from work every day. I could not take him seriously, as he was suddenly planning a career for me and asking me to study economics. My mum agreed with him, saying I could inherit my father's construction company and his influence in society, so studying economics would be good for my future.

She was silent about the idea of me studying abroad, but whenever the subject was opened at dinner, my mum always supported my father. My options were limited. I couldn't choose not to go to university, because you'd be condemned by the community if you didn't. Yet I didn't know what else I could do. I could either take courses and study to retake the exams next year or attend English language and SAT courses and prepare to go to university in America.

During the last days of summer vacation, I was shocked when I saw on Facebook that Aytekin and Sumru were dating. I looked at the post over and over again, realizing that their relationship was real. Pelin was very pleased with the situation. But Pelin, Sumru, and I were childhood friends. How could they do this to me? Aytekin even approached Sumru, even though Aytekin knew I liked him. Why did no one tell me anything? Was I so forgettable?

I spent those last days of summer in my room sleeping, but it didn't change anything; they were still together. One day at dinner when my parents started to fight about college again, I calmly said, "Okay, I'll go to America. I will go anywhere, just shut up."

This would be the beginning of my new life and the end of those lousy days.

...

When I woke up I was shaking; all night I'd been sleeping with the air conditioning vent blowing on me and without a blanket. The room was covered with a light smell of cigarettes, and the reason was sleeping on the bed, her back to me. The sun had already risen, but my beloved roommate had closed the blinds. It was 7 a.m. and breakfast began at 8 in the breakfast lounge of the dorm.

I made so much effort not to wake Emily, but I thought I still made a lot of noise. Yet she continued to sleep. After choosing leggings and a loose T-shirt, I did my makeup and used a fixing spray to prevent it from running in the warm weather. When I went down to the breakfast room, there were already a few people waiting for the buffet to open. I walked to the back of the queue and everyone told me good morning. I thought that was curious, since it's usually only store employees who say hi first. I was only able to respond with a smile of astonishment.

I could barely eat anything, and anyway, the breakfast seemed lukewarm: scrambled eggs, home fries, a number of sausages, and some fruits. My eyes searched for olives, cheese, and tomatoes, but I hadn't seen them at breakfast in America since I arrived. So this is how breakfast was going to be here; instead, I barely finished a bowl of cereal.

As I left the breakfast room, a dark-skinned girl approached me.

"Are you going to orientation?" she asked, smiling. "What classes are you taking?"

I pointed to the paper in my hand and said, "In this building. I think the room is on the ground floor."

"I'm Katie," she said, looking at my schedule. "We're in the same department."

I thought of shaking hands but once again, I didn't see a hand thrusting out. *No hugging, no handshaking, no kissing*, I thought to myself. *Don't forget this unless you want to be known as a freaking weirdo!*

Together we started walking to our building. Katie told me she was from California, how many brothers she had, and that she already missed her family. I listened with a smile; she was so nice and seemingly open-minded. I was afraid I wouldn't understand anything she said, but my fear didn't come true. I understood almost everything, even though Katie had a strange accent. Although really, everyone had a strange accent, but I hoped I'd get used to it.

At the entrance to the building, Katie said, "I'm going to the lecture room. See you later!" and left me alone.

Everyone was picking up frosted coffees from the Starbucks in the building. Were they seriously having coffee in class? Okay, last year at school, everyone, including the teacher, ate and drank in the classroom, but this wasn't against the rules at university? I was nervous and drenched with sweat when I entered the room. Everyone was already chatting with each other. Was this really the orientation? I wished Katie was still here, so I wouldn't look so alone. I found a free seat in the second row. The girls in the front row had already gotten out pens and notebooks; front-row hard workers are the same all over the world.

Chapter 4

The scrawny male lecturer who entered the room told us that he was an assistant in the department and that he would introduce us to the department and then show us the library. After his long speech filled with jokes, he divided us into groups of ten. I was in the fifth group. The groups gathered as the teacher told us these would be the groups with whom we'd see campus.

I had already predicted that I would not be the only foreigner in the department; I was excited to meet the others. There were students from Sudan, Egypt, and Spain. This group, unlike the others, did not talk too much. The instructor continued to crack jokes as we toured campus.

By 5 p.m. we'd seen the library, health center, student work office, cafeteria, and many more buildings. It was tiring to visit so many buildings in the extremely hot weather and jarring to enter the freezing interiors. When the orientation ended, I hardly made it to my room.

Emily had left the room without opening the blinds; the room was dark. When I opened the blinds I noticed some changes in the room. Over the top of Emily's desk was a stack of labeled books that apparently were from the library. On the bed, there was a suitcase full of books and another stack of books beside it.

I don't really know why, but Emily looked like someone who neither studied hard nor read books. I took a look at the colorful books on the bed. I picked up one with a red cover right when the door opened and Emily came in. She was surprised to see me.

"Are you going through my books?" she asked calmly.

A chill ran down my back. "No, never!" I managed to say, dropping the book on the bed.

"Books are personal belongings. You should have known that. If you are curious, you are welcome to ask me." She sounded both calm and angry, but then she backtracked. "I'm sorry. I was just surprised," she stammered.

Not only was I soaking wet with sweat, I also felt my face turn crimson. I sat on my bed, not knowing what to do. I felt disgusting. I just managed to look at her when she told me, "It's really no problem. I'm in my third year of creative writing. My books are my life. I overreacted; I apologize."

I did not think someone dressed like her, with her dark makeup, would smile, but she smiled at me.

"I apologize again; I had no bad intentions," I said. I was on the verge of tears, but Emily was still smiling.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm going out. See you later."

When she left the room, the tears I had been holding back burst out. I was so ashamed, I could not even look at her side of the room. I was not hungry nor thirsty. I just wanted to take a shower and sleep as soon as possible.

...

On the second and final day of the orientation, I was supposed to get information about departmental courses and their instructors. I did not see Katie when I went down to breakfast. I was starving, so I ate a banana along with my corn cereal. While leaving the room, I saw others throwing fruit in their bags without hesitating. I wondered if I could do the same, but I did not dare to. I couldn't stand to be scolded again.

When I sat down in the orientation room in the same spot I chose yesterday, I looked for my group from yesterday, but I didn't see them. A guy wearing a short-sleeved shirt with lambskin canvas pants caught my attention as he sat down; nobody dressed like that here.

"Are you looking at my pants?" he asked me in Turkish.

I was shocked, I never imagined there would be another Turk in the department. Why did no one tell me that? Everything could have been easier since the beginning!

"Are you Turkish?" I managed to say.

"What do you think?" he asked. "My name is Abdullah. When I saw your name on the list yesterday, I thought you were the Turkish girl in the department."

"How so?" I asked. His hair was brownish blonde; he was not very handsome, but there was a clean and pure expression on his face. I could not understand why he chose a plain white shirt like someone's dad, or why he wore those pants.

“How what?” he asked, smiling. “I mean, you were the only one that looked like a Turk in yesterday's orientation group. I think I guessed right.”

I do not know why, but I kind of liked his answer. When I thought about how I would answer, an older female lecturer came to greet us. I took notes as the woman started talking about the courses, as well as finances and loans, but Abdullah did not take any notes. I supposed he could understand best only by listening.

On our break, he asked, “Which courses are you taking?”

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask, but none of them were about the courses he was taking. When I told him what classes I was taking, it was my turn. He offered to go to the cafeteria with me at lunch. I couldn't fully warm to this boy. We sat at a table with a girl and two other Turkish men in the cafeteria. They were well groomed like Abdullah, but they were much more reserved than him. I noticed they were all scholars (and nerds). It was also the first year for Semra, the girl whom I learned attended a language course in Pennsylvania for one year. Ahmet and Erkan were in electrical engineering like Semra. They all said they were friends from Istanbul, but they were not from the same high school.

It was relaxing, being able to speak Turkish, but Ahmet and Erkan were so quiet I eventually felt like I was talking too much, so I kept quiet. Semra said she was going to eat in the cafeteria again for dinner, and she invited me! Although Abdullah surprised me by promising to go to dinner, I was even more surprised when he offered me to buy me a coffee after lunch.

While we were in the coffee line, he said, "I think everyone here is dependent on something to drink. Never see them empty-handed.”

Indeed, there was hardly anyone who did not have a water bottle or some other drink in their hand. They seemed to be paying so much attention to their health, so all those obese people

I saw didn't make sense. When I said, "I'm still shocked that I can take food and drinks to class," Abdullah laughed happily.

"It should be that way," he said. "The rigidity in our education system is unnecessary. But maybe the universities in Turkey are also not so strict. Who knows."

Immediately I remembered the photos Sumru and Pelin shared during the English preparatory class at the university. They took photos of their coffee cups every morning, and I was relieved that they were not in the same class. Over the past few months I unfriended Aytekin in all of my social media accounts, but Sumru and Pelin remained. I didn't know why I didn't delete them as well or why on earth I was still looking at their photos every day. But at least I was not jealous anymore. I came here to build a better life than theirs.

Chapter 5

I was so hot in my tights and T-shirt, I wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible. I told Abdullah I was going to change my clothes before going to the cafeteria for dinner. I put on a flowered dress that came down to my knees, and I plaited my sweaty hair to make it look more tidy.

When I got my food at the cafeteria, I found Semra and Abdullah sitting face to face.

"Wow, you look very beautiful," Abdullah said, looking at my dress. I saw Semra look hard at Abdullah.

Feeling a little guilty, I said, "Thank you," and sat down with my food.

"Well, Semra, no other Turkish girls in the dormitory?" I asked. "Maybe we could hang out together?" I regretted it immediately, but I needed friends, and I did not trust the men.

"There are other Turkish students, of course, but not in our dormitory," Semra said. "They get together every Friday evening. If you want, we could go together. I don't know most of them."

I threw a glance at Abdullah.

“I can’t come,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Only girls can go,” Semra said.

“Well, okay,” I said. I didn’t understand why the men couldn’t come, but I knew the less men were around, the less trouble the girls would have. After the meal, Semra said that she was going to the library.

“Why do you need to go to the library before classes have started?” I asked.

“I have some preliminary work to do,” she said, hurrying out.

“What are you going to do?” Abdullah asked me.

I did not want to spend a lot of time with him yet even though his presence relaxed me. And I knew a few of our lessons were at the same time; our first lesson in the morning was one of them.

“I have to go back to my dorm,” I said. “I have not arranged my room yet. See you in class tomorrow!”

I had organized my room many days ago, but I did not want to walk around with Abdullah. When I got to my room, I saw Emily had left, along with some of her books. It was impossible to relax in my room because loud rap music was coming from an open door down the hall. I took my laptop and went to the common room.

It was late at night in Turkey, and I had already talked with my mother today. I was going to fiddle around on the Internet—there was nothing else to do until class started. When I turned on my laptop I saw that Abdullah had sent me a friend request. I accepted his request and I found Ahmet and Erkan's accounts and sent friend requests to them as well. I could not find Semra’s account. She struck me as a strange girl.

I took a selfie including the common room behind me. I captioned it: *And school starts at full speed...* and I posted it. I made the decision to share photos often, and was happy when I quickly got five likes on my photo.

Eventually I got sleepy, and went back to my room. Emily and John sat on the carpeted floor discussing a stack of books. When they saw me, both laughed and greeted me.

"We can go out if you want to sleep," Emily said.

I was going to sleep, but I didn't want to tell them that.

"No, no, it's okay. I was going to read a book," I said. "Are you doing homework?" Even as I said it, I realized I didn't have a book to read.

"Today is our second day of class, but the project assignments have already been distributed," John said. "We're already busy."

It felt good that they were sharing with me.

"Our orientation just ended," I said. "Classes start tomorrow."

"You're lucky," Emily said, rolling her eyes. "I miss freshman year very much. We read lots of books, and classes were fun. Now it's complete torture."

While we talked, they were skimming through the books, sticking post-it notes in important places. I wanted to look busy like them. I was still thinking about my every sentence and speaking slowly, but I knew that if I did not try to speak I wouldn't make any friends.

"What did you read then?" I asked. "I would like to read something you enjoyed your first year."

They both stopped what they were doing and looked at me.

"What style of books do you like?" Emily asked.

Indeed, what style of books *did* I like? Until now, I had read few books except for those the school forced me to, but I did not enjoy those because Sumru forced them on me. While I

thought of something to say, wanting to curl up and die, John reached into his bag. He took a worn-out black book and handed it to me.

"This is one of my favorite books," he said. "If you want my advice, I recommend reading this."

I looked at the cover of the book: *Looking for Alaska*. I realized the book smelled like cigarette butts. I was so excited to read it, but I was worried the smell would keep me from enjoying the book. I did not say anything.

"You can keep it," he said. "I'm sure you'll finish it quickly and love it." For the first time, I saw this man in black smile.

My face burned from amazement and happiness; I was sure that I glowed.

"Thank you very much," I said. "I will finish it and give it back as soon as possible."

John winked at me and tucked a long, straight hair behind his ear. "Perhaps you will find your past and your future, a book that speaks to you. Then you can thank me."

I thanked him again, and I lay down on my bed and began to read. There were so many thoughts in my head that it was hard to focus. John and Emily had already forgotten about me and were arguing about the books in front of them. It made me a little uncomfortable that a man I didn't know was so comfortable hanging out in my room. The closest person to me in my life was my brother Sarp, but he was just a kid and even he didn't spend much time in my room.

In the book, I saw notes in what I assumed was John's handwriting, but I couldn't read them. Finally, Emily and John stopped quarreling, and John put the stack of books in his bag and left. Emily said she was going to sleep, and I said she could turn out the light. She then gave me a little light.

"You can attach it to your book," she said. "It's my savior." She took off her shoes and shirt and got into bed.

I attached the light to my book and looked at Emily, who was already asleep, still in her clothes. The room was dominated by the smell of cigarettes. I looked at her shirt on the floor. My mother would have killed me if I threw my clothes on the floor. I guess here I was meant to be adult and free.

Chapter 6

The lessons started quickly; I felt so confused. I took notes while trying to figure out what the teachers said. The notes I wrote were half in Turkish and half in English. I tried to hide what I wrote from Abdullah; he only sat and listened with his elbows on the desk, almost without blinking, not taking notes. I felt very stupid.

None of my other classes were with Abdullah, which was a little more relaxing, but I still felt like I couldn't catch up. At the end of the lessons I was so tired, my brain felt swollen. Then I got an email from my education adviser in Turkey that said, "I know it's difficult in the first days. The lessons will be very complicated and heavy, but do not give up. Every day you will take notes and read them, which will be very beneficial to you."

I was going to do that, but I was not sure it was going to help me to understand.

When I returned to the dorm I saw Katie again. She chatted with me with the same warmth as she did at orientation. When she asked how my life was going, I could not lie to her: "Boring and lonely."

I could not believe it when she said she felt the same. How could someone who was so warm and energetic be bored and lonely?

"But college life is too good to be bored," she said. "Would you come with me to a meeting on Sunday?"

I thought she was inviting me to church, but she must've understood my confusion.

"It will be my first time going, too," she said. "In the evening we're going to meet at a student's home in the city center."

When I realized she didn't mean church, I was relieved and felt accepted. I did not go to church or mosque except for tourist visits. I knew that for most people, church was important and shaped their lives accordingly. But I was a stranger to this; neither my family nor my friends went to church. I did not even know which religion I would have belonged to; it wasn't like it was written in my ID. Even though I was still afraid of every move I made, at least Katie hadn't asked me to go to church.

When I ate my dinner in the dorm cafeteria that night, I brought John's book with me. I still hadn't started it, but today I was determined to. I put a little notebook beside the book, and I took a photo. I wrote the same sentence John said to me, and I shared it on social media: "I found my past, my future, and a book that speaks to me."

When I finished my dinner, I was amazed by all the comments and likes by family and friends.

...

I was excited when Friday came; I was so tired at the end of the week. I did not see Abdullah in class on Friday, but I hesitated to sit with Semra and the other Turkish students. They didn't seem to want to be friends yet.

But at dinner that night, I saw Semra in the cafeteria. When I entered the food line, Semra came up to me.

"When we leave here, why don't we stop by the dorm?" she asked, looking at my short shorts and T-shirt. "We can wait while you change clothes."

I did not know what she meant.

"I was not thinking about changing—do you think I need to wear something different?" I asked.

"You know," she said calmly.

There wasn't much time. If I changed my clothes, we would never be ready at half past six.

"It's okay. I'll go like this," I said. Semra did not answer. I tried to make conversation as she walked rapidly across campus, and it made me nervous. After a while I decided to stop talking.

When we arrived at the other end of the campus, where it turned into office buildings, we entered a single-story building, which I had never noticed. When Semra said that we should take our shoes off when we entered, lightning struck: We came to the campus masjid! And I was about to enter the masjid with my short shorts and shirt!

I smiled at Semra, who was waiting for me, looking bored. I tried to pretend that I was aware from the very beginning we were coming to a mosque, and I entered the building. There was a long hallway, and at the end of the hallway there was a room with the lights on. I felt bad when I stepped onto the carpeted floor with my bare feet. Why did Semra not warn me we were coming here? What were they going to do to me?

Inside, there were many girls with their heads covered who were obviously from different nations. None of them were as sullen and silent as Semra; instead, they greeted us as "Selamunaleyküm, Muslim sister." This warm greeting made me happy, and it became clear why I was there: I had been invited to a Muslim religious meeting.

We sat in a circle in the small room and waited for other girls to come. The waiting caused a pain in my stomach. With every new girl that came in, the environment got livelier, but

my nerves grew. I was tugging down my shorts as if that was going to work. Finally, a woman with a dark green headscarf and gown clapped her hands and invited all of us to be silent.

"Dear Muslim sisters, you are all welcome to our masjid," she said. "I see old and new sisters among us and greet you all with the salutation of Allah. We are happy to be meeting again on this blessed Friday. I want everyone to introduce themselves before the meeting starts."

I wanted to run away. I did not like being in this place where I did not feel like I belonged to either the community or myself. Muslim girls from all over the world were here, including some I had never seen on campus. Probably they stayed quiet in daily life. Girls from other countries were speaking in unfamiliar accents. Semra was sitting beside me; she said she came from Turkey and her age. Her voice was strong and confident.

When it was my turn, I said the same thing, but I continued to sweat. After everyone introduced herself, the woman in green spoke. She was from Indonesia and seemed to be older than us. She happily talked about the activities the group did the previous year, and she ensured the masjid had been built only for girls. They also helped many young Muslim girls outside campus to learn the Qur'an. When the meeting ended, people were talking about what they would do next and what they would talk about in the next meeting, and several people stood up to leave.

This is my chance, I thought. I stood up and whispered to Semra, "I must go."

I said goodbye to the woman in green and left the building. It was the first time that I welcomed the scorching heat outside. I started to breathe deeply again and relax while I essentially ran away. How did I end up there? What were they doing, and why did Semra bring me there? Was every Turk in there like Semra?

When I got to my dorm, I was out of breath. I entered the cold air again, realizing that the wetness on my face was not sweat but tears.

Chapter 7

When I woke up in the morning, I still felt depressed. I felt like I'd been fooled. Before breakfast, I called my mum to tell her what happened, my eyes filling with tears. My mother couldn't understand the seriousness of the situation and was laughing out loud. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore, and I yelled,

“Mom, she fooled me. How can you laugh so much?”

“Oh, my poor girl, you just realized how mean life can be,” she said, still laughing. “They were not really being mean to you. And anyway, you protected yourself and behaved respectfully. You got out of there without freaking out.”

“I feel better, Mum. Thanks,” I said. Surprisingly, the fact that she was laughing at this situation had made me stop crying.

“We made a mistake,” Mum, returning to her normal, calm self, said. “You've been in the same school since kindergarten; you grew up in the same environment. We should've shown you more, to allow you to distinguish between good and bad.”

She was right; when I started kindergarden, Sumru and Pelin became my best friends. I went to the elementary, secondary, and high school of the same private school system. As a family, we always spent time with the same people, never going anywhere except our neighborhood. If I hadn't gone to SAT and English classes last year, I wouldn't even have known what public transportation meant. But I didn't blame my mother.

“Don't take the fall for me, Mum. It's nobody's fault,” I said. “You are right; I'm on my own now and I have to learn about people.”

Mum blew me a kiss through the phone screen.

“My daughter is already grown up,” she said. “You are a very strong and intelligent girl.” Just then, Sarp entered the picture and threw a tiny ball at the camera. My mother got angry and

made him leave the room. “Something came over this boy after we got back. He is more aggressive and impudent. I’ve been praying for him to go back to school,” she complained.

It was really weird, because Sarp was always a mischievous boy, but he wouldn't hurt anyone.

“Maybe he misses his sister,” I said, trying to cheer my mother up. “Kiss him for me.”

...

It felt good to spend the weekend alone in my room. I was engrossed in my notes and started the book John gave me—I was in good spirits. The boy in the book decided to go to a boarding school, entering an unknown environment, just like me. Although I couldn't read it as fast as I wanted because of the words I didn't know, I found it fun to share quotes from the book every day on social media.

Emily stopped by the room occasionally, cursing about lectures and school, then she'd disappear for hours.

Abdullah texted me asking how my day was going. I thought he was teasing me, sure that Abdullah and others were all members of the same religious sect. That's why they were so mean, making me go with them. At least Semra and Abdullah had tried to get to know me, I guess.

I often found excuses to send video calls to mom or Sarp. I told myself I didn't have to go to the dining room or study hall; I snacked on junk food in my room's fridge. I wouldn't keep my promise to Katie to meet her on Sunday; I wasn't ready for a new surprise after Friday. I looked up my uncle on Facebook and found that he was in town, so I wrote to him that I'd like to see him. I thought seeing my uncle would work as an excuse to Katie.

Chapter 8

When I woke up on Monday, I had stomach cramps. I was trying to pretend I wasn't nervous, but I was. The idea of seeing Abdullah, Semra, and other Turks again was very intimidating. It seemed as though they'd all mocked me, grabbed my arm, and dragged me somewhere. Like I did all weekend, I tried to think of an excuse to stay in my room. Looking in the mirror, I checked my foundation and my mascara again and again, and kept looking at my shoes as if they didn't match my clothes.

Emily woke up while I moved around.

"For God's sake, what are you doing?" she asked, squinting.

For the first time, I saw she was in pajamas. Even though her face was as white as always, without the heavy eye makeup, she looked like any ordinary girl. I opened my mouth to apologize but realized I was sick to my stomach. Emily got out of bed.

"Are you sick?" she asked.

I couldn't open my mouth because of the nausea, and my tears began to flow. I wanted to yell to my mother about what was happening, but I couldn't say these things to Emily.

"The first month is always the most difficult," she said. "College can be hell with no one to protect you. But don't worry, you'll be better day by day." She said this in a sweet tone I didn't expect from her, which made me cry more. I felt ashamed of myself.

"I'm not going to fit in here," I said, blowing my nose. Emily's coldness was gone; she brought me a glass of water and sat beside me on my bed. She looked at me carefully.

"When is your class?" she asked.

"8:40."

"Then you'd better get going now. Can you make it there alone?"

"Yes, there are just some people I don't want to see."

"Did they hurt you?"

Her considerate words calmed me, and the nausea disappeared.

“No, no ... It's a ridiculous story, but I'm still afraid to see them.”

“You cannot run away,” Emily said. “Sooner or later you have to face them; the campus is not a huge place.”

“Yes, I know. I just ...” My tears started to flow again. I looked at Emily. She was smiling at me, even showing her teeth!

“Don't worry. You'll realize that it's not that bad when you talk to them.” She noticed *Looking for Alaska* near my pillow and grabbed it. “Look, if you don't want anyone to talk to you, bury yourself in your book. Pretend to read. If you think you can't, then read George's notes. But even if you can't read those, you can look busy that way.”

We both laughed. I took the book and shook my head. I would try to read it.

“Thank you, Emily,” I said, feeling a little better. “I will read the book. I like the characters in the book; they're nothing like me.” I stood up. I wanted to hug Emily, but I was sure she wouldn't want to. Instead, I thanked her, and rushed to class.

I arrived at class at the last minute, taking my seat behind the hard-working girls on the front row, and I focused on the teacher immediately. During the lecture I forgot Abdullah and Semra, but when one of them called to me after class, I felt my stomach cramp again. Abdullah was again in his ironed pants and his short-sleeved white shirt.

“Should we have some coffee?” he asked with a smile. He acted as if nothing had happened.

“Sorry, I have to take down my lecture notes,” I said, though the lie was written all over me. But Abdullah did not see. He bowed his head as my father did to his customers, made the sign for OK, and left.

I didn't see Abdullah again for the rest of the day, nor did I want to see him. When I went to the dormitory's food hall instead of going to the university dining hall, I avoided seeing Semra as well. And anyway, I had new friends now: John Green and his imaginary characters! At every opportunity, I buried myself in the book, as Emily said, aspiring to the friendships in the story.

I thought of Emily as a friend after being so understanding toward me, and John was also a friend because he lent me his book, but I never thought to hang out with them like the characters in the book.

As classes went on, I got very confused. I had never been good with numbers, but as my counselor said, if I reviewed all my notes, I would come to understand. The second and third week I got down to the real details in my classes, which had been chosen by my father and counselors in Turkey, and I didn't understand anything. The mathematics I was used to wasn't even the same math anymore.

At the university, I could take any classes and change my department. Now, I wondered why I was taking all these classes. But I also wondered if there were *any* classes I would understand here.

The lessons passed at the speed of light, and I tried to write down everything I saw and heard in my notebook. When I got back to my dorm room, I was engrossed in my notebooks, trying to understand what I'd written in them. I guess Abdullah also noticed that I was avoiding him at every opportunity; neither he nor Semra had called or texted again. Maybe, in their eyes, Merve was a sinner. I decided it was best to ignore them. Everyone except me seemed to be accustomed to the classes; there were even those who asked questions and made jokes. I was still getting used to talking and listening to lectures in English, and I couldn't follow everyday conversations.

I mentioned to Emily that I was having trouble with my homework, and she asked why I didn't do it with a friend of mine. That's when I decided to talk to Katie. When I found her in the study room before the first exam of my Introduction to Economics class, she asked,

“You're here again. What is the problem this time?”

I felt like the world's biggest fool. I always felt like one of the biggest fools in the world, but after Katie's question, I was definitely the biggest. Katie's attitude reminded me of Abdullah; a nice person who really wanted to talk to me would never say something like that.

Chapter 9

Every time I saw John, I felt guilty. I wanted to tell him that I couldn't finish the book, but I still loved it. But John seemed to have forgotten that I had the book. Whenever he came to our room, he included me in conversation with him and Emily. Topics were always simple so I could share my views on them; we could talk for hours on topics such as, why is forbidden love so exciting? Can a middle-school character speak so wisely? And how grandmothers always love to cook for their grandchildren. They never invited me anywhere outside of the dorm room, but I looked forward to our conversations. Every time, I started conversations thinking, *I'm not competent, and I wish they hadn't asked me asked me anything*. But they always led to me talking about something feverishly. I usually talked about my own life or the book, because in real life, I had no close friend or significant other. But they listened to my ideas as seriously as they would a professor and shared ideas with me.

There was so much I didn't understand. Why were my ideas important to them? Wasn't there anyone else on campus they could've talked to? Were Emily and John friends, or were they dating? Why did they both color their hair black and paint their faces with white foundation? Why did they always wear black? Why couldn't we be friends outside of the room after talking so much?

What I liked most about the school of economics was my Economy, Society, and Civilization course. Our middle-aged, female teacher who preferred sportswear at all times lectured excitedly as if she was telling a story. If she was talking about a war, she sometimes became serious, sometimes aggressive, as if she were fighting. I liked to listen to her, and I understood everything she described. I even liked studying my notes from her class. I was happy to do her weekly assignments, even if I couldn't comment on political history like the other students. Everything I wrote seemed wrong; every comment I made sounded childish.

When I thought about studying in America, I didn't know what to expect, but I never assumed it would be like this.

One Monday, when I felt really lonely, I decided to talk to Abdullah, who greeted me during the class break. I told him nobody was going to take me to a religious meeting without my consent, but that it would be great if somebody took me *somewhere*. I hadn't gone anywhere except classes, the dormitory, and the grocery store since I arrived. I was tired of looking like a loser wandering around alone.

Abdullah's smile, and talking to him in Turkish, warmed me to him again, and I bought him a coffee. When I complained about my classes, I learned that he was taking harder classes than I was. But he listened to me with a smile and patience. When I told him that I haven't started studying for exams yet; he offered to study with me. He asked to meet in a coffee shop downtown. This set my mind at ease; I was happy now.

Last year, even after I lost my friends, Mum was with me all the time. We went shopping or to cafes or just wandered around. With Sarp, we went to the movies, the arcade, or played tennis in the court next to our house.

I hadn't talked to my mother or Sarp lately. Sarp, immersed in online games, did not want to chat with me much. My mother seemed to be more tired day after day; she always wanted to

end conversations quickly. When I asked why, she said she was working hard in the parent-teacher association at Sarp's school and was tired of the busy pace. And she complained about Sarp; I never expected to hear about his mischief. On Sunday evenings I talked with my father. It understood from these conversations that he was on bad terms with my mother. Though they were never on good terms with each other. The Kırıcı family had never really been like a family, but we looked like one in the eyes of other people. But they couldn't even pretend lately; I could see this even from the video calls.

The coffee shop where I was supposed to meet Abdullah wasn't far from the dorm. In Turkey it was fall—leaves were changing and winter was coming—but it was still scorching hot in Arizona. When I arrived at the café, Abdullah was waiting for me at a table in a dark corner. He hadn't brought anything with him. After I got some coffee, he opened my notebooks. He didn't talk much, answering my questions with simple, short answers. The time passed quickly, and soon I realized it was getting dark.

Our dim corner was getting darker. I had to lean over my notebook to see the notes. Abdullah also had leaned over with a smile curled on his lips. He was staring intently at my face. I didn't understand why, but our arms were touching, and I was getting hot all over. I was trying to focus on formulas, but he pushed his chair next to mine. Someone who saw us could have thought we were lovers.

I couldn't decide whether I wanted to curl up and die or flee, but Abdullah gently threw his left arm on my shoulder. My body was stiff; it was the first time I'd been in such close contact with a guy. I couldn't figure out what he wanted to do, but now his smiles and insightful looks had trailed to the low cut of my floral dress.

I was shocked; I never expected anything like that. I couldn't even open my mouth; his hand on my shoulder gently moved to my arm, and then toward my chest. I was numb

everywhere; I could only look at Abdullah in a daze. My mind was screaming, telling me to run away.

"You're beautiful. I love this dress," he said, looking into my eyes. He blushed, but it seemed like he said things like this all the time. He kissed my neck, then slowly kissed my ear. His hand under my arm now tucked into my dress and my bra. His hand was wet with sweat; he grabbed my breast, and his other hand hugged my waist. He didn't leave any space for me to escape, and he was slowly pulling me to him. He started kissing my lips. I couldn't escape.

This kissing was nothing like the kissing scenes I saw in the movies. He licked my face. He pinched my breast, which hurt. I tried to get up as soon as I gathered my courage, but Abdullah blocked me with his arms. When he stopped licking my face, he consistently murmured, "You're beautiful, you're beautiful, you're great." His hand grasped my waist tightly and slid slowly down, touching my leg. I broke away and stood up.

Chapter 10

I straightened my dress as I ran to the bathroom. What happened? What was happening? What was I doing? Did I like what he did? Did I like him, too? Was I really beautiful?

I had to go back because I left everything on the table, including my cell phone and wallet. I washed my face with cold water and fixed my makeup, then went back to the table, where Abdullah was back to his old self. He signaled me to sit next to him.

"I like you very much," he said. "I'm sorry. I was excited."

I didn't know what to say; I just stared into the distance. What was I supposed to say? Was it rude not saying "I like you back" to someone who just said they liked me?

Abdullah was the nicest person I'd met in America, but he didn't feel so nice when he pinched my breast.

“I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you,” Abdullah continued excitedly. More gracefully this time, he put his arm around me. “I can’t get you and your floral dress out of my mind.”

“Tha– Thank you. I’m surprised,” I managed to say.

“I thought you had a boyfriend,” he said. “And I thought you understood that I liked you, so I stopped talking to you. But when you mentioned studying, I said that’s it!”

While he talked, his restless hand on my waist moved down to my thigh. It lingered where my dress ended.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I said. “I don’t get it. I did not know ...” I really didn’t know; my mouth was dry. I wanted him to keep his hands off, wanted to collect my thoughts. I wanted to talk calmly and find out what he wanted from me. But he wouldn’t stop talking, and he kissed me everywhere he could. “W... Wait a minute!”

I stood up and pulled my chair away. Abdullah looked surprised. It took time for me to compose my sentences.

“I don’t want to be your girlfriend. I don’t know if I like you.”

“You just wanna hang out?” he asked. “That’s fine with me. Others don’t have to know that we’re lovers.”

“I wanted to meet you because I thought you would help me with my classes. I had no other intention! I thought we could be friends. I wasn’t thinking about all this!” I said desperately. I knew I was blushing again as I rushed to collect my things. I didn’t want my face being licked again.

“At least we could have hooked up. It wouldn’t matter to you, anyhow,” he said coldly.

I couldn’t believe my ears; it was too much.

“I don't know how you see me, but I'm not what you think I am,” I said. “And I won't let you touch me again!”

“I already touched you; that's enough for me,” he said coldly.

I grabbed my backpack and ran. I was crying again, and I couldn't believe the things I had heard or what happened. What kind of a man was he? Just now he said he liked me, but then he insulted me?

When I got back to my dorm, my heart throbbed wildly. My mouth went dry; I had a terrible headache. Was I just being abused? How could a man be so rude?

Emily wasn't there. I paced back and forth, thinking about what happened. I wasn't going to get a wink of sleep. I had a close encounter with a guy, and I was humiliated. I hated men. I relived the events over and over; I couldn't hold back my tears. It was harassment. I eventually fell asleep, and I woke up to noises in the room.

“You look awful,” Emily said. “Were you up all night?”

I could never tell her.

“Yes, I was studying all night,” I lied. “I think I hate numbers.”

“At 2 this afternoon, a writer, Jack Trois, will be at the conference hall. You should come along; he's a fun guy. You would get a break from the numbers.”

The invitation I'd been looking forward to for weeks had finally come, but now I was exhausted. I was just about to refuse when I realized had no alternative; what else would I do if I didn't go?

“Sure. I will come.”

When I entered the Social Sciences building, the smell of paper mixed with dust hit my nostrils. It made me feel good. I almost didn't care that I'd had to hide my swollen eyelids with makeup. I was welcomed by John when I walked into the hall where the interview was.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he said. “Trois is an amusing man. Maybe you could read his books, too.” He smiled in a way I’d never expected.

”If you recommend me one of his books, I’ll buy it here,” I said.

The author really was a fun man. He chatted with the students on almost every subject. I forgot everything while listening to them speak: last night’s events, being at college, my loneliness, my family’s bizarre attitudes.

After the interview, I went to get his autograph. There was a man with blue eyes, a beard, and glasses sitting next to Jack Trois. When I gave my name for the signature, the man in glasses asked where I was from. The long line behind me started to mutter, but we talked anyway. Hearing the grunts, the man in glasses laughed and said, “Let’s chat aside, before others get pissed.”

He asked me about Turkey, myself, and my family, and my shyness and fear of speaking English wrong disappeared as we spoke. The guy with the glasses had a name: it was Michael, and everyone called him Mike. He was an assistant in Emily and John’s department, and they were good friends. He had visited Turkey and loved it. He had even been to places like Tahtakale and Unkapanı where I had never been; he said he was inspired by it all.

“I’m starving; let’s go to lunch,” Emily said, walking up to me, as if we hung out all the time. She must’ve noticed my confused reaction. “Food, you know? What we eat when we get hungry?” she joked.

I relaxed a bit. I didn’t hate life or men as much as I did last night.

We went to a restaurant outside campus. We got ice waters and ordered our food, and Jack Trois joined us. Noticing my surprise, John leaned over to me and said, “Jack and Mike are old friends, so he often comes to visit.”

Everyone was very pleased with the talk, and rehashed what had been said. They often asked for my ideas, like I was really part of the group.

On our way back to the dorm, I said to Emily, “Thank you so much for inviting me. It really cheered me up. And I met a new writer; I even have a signed copy.”

“You looked really tired this morning,” Emily said. “I’m glad you came.” When I got back to my room, I uploaded the whole afternoon, including the interview, autograph, and meal to Instagram, and I wrote in English: *It was a great afternoon. Thanks, my friends.*

I was sure that those in Istanbul would wonder. Because I tagged everyone, including Jack and Mike.

Chapter 11

After that day, my life was both very good and very bad. Most of the exams I took were just sheets of blank paper. My mind was always in the books I read. I finally had finished *Looking for Alaska*, and now I was reading my autographed book. Both affected me in different ways. So I started to take notes in my book like John did before. I had no idea why I hadn’t read books before. I guess that was because there weren’t any books in my house growing up.

When I read, I went to different worlds, crying and laughing with characters. Moreover, my vocabulary expanded the more English I read. I wasn’t afraid to speak English anymore. Sometimes I went out with John, Emily, and Mike. We talked about books and films. When they drank beer, they never commented on my choice of drink: Diet Coke. My friends in Istanbul would laugh at me and say tauntingly: “Merve the baby. You don’t even drink beer!” They humiliated anyone who wasn’t the same as them.

One time, when I was complaining about my classes, Mike said, “Why don’t you change your department?” I thought he was joking at first, but he was serious.

“My father sent me to study economics,” I said. “If I change departments, he’ll go crazy.”

“Your father may go crazy, but what do you want?” Emily asked. “Which department would you like to move to?”

The question surprised me. What would I really like to study?

“I think I'd like to be in creative writing, like you,” I said. “It's a lot of fun to read; it seems it would be fun to write, too.” Everyone laughed except Mike.

“Writing books is not that much fun,” he said. “But it's fun to learn about. Do you really want to join our department?”

Mike surprised me, too.

“My English is so bad that you wouldn't want me anyway,” I said.

This time it was John who was serious.

“Come on,” he said. “You speak very good English for someone whose native language is not English. I'm sure you will be equally good at writing.”

“I don't know... My father would take me out of school if I don't study economics.” A few images from my childhood swam before my eyes: my father yelling at us all with his blushed scalp, spit sputtering from his mouth.

“Don't be such a coward!” Emily said angrily. “How can he take you out of school; aren't you an adult now? If he won't pay for your schooling, you can get student loans like we do.”

I had never seen Emily angry before. She wasn't even that angry when I touched her books at the beginning of the semester. I never thought about being an adult, because I didn't feel like one. Yes, I was legally an adult. I could get a student loan. But when I thought about my dad, I felt like a little girl.

“Merve, we all go through life once,” Mike said seriously. “To study in a department, you dislike because your father wants you to is a waste. But the decision is yours. At the end of the semester, you can apply to change departments. I'd help you.”

John began to cheer with an enthusiasm that wouldn't be expected from his white, powdered face, and Emily cheered, too. Me with my Diet Coke, them with their beers—we toasted to me “having control of my own life.” I promised them and myself that I would think about it.

That night I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about what we talked about. What was writing like? Why did they say it was so hard? Was it something I could learn? I searched “creative writing” on the internet. I read: “Creative writing is a field that can be learned like all other fine arts. There is nothing a person cannot achieve with discipline and a good education.” This was encouraging, and left me excited. No longer tired, my father out of my mind, I grabbed a pen. I went to the study hall.

I opened to a blank page and put the pen to the paper, and I started writing without a pause, as if I was pouring things out on paper that had been building in me for years. I wasn't sure what I was writing, but it was important that I write and enjoy it. When the pen ran out of ink, I grabbed another pen, but I didn't stop.

When the sun came up, the lamps of the study hall dimmed in the light of the rising sun, Katie touched my arm. I'd fallen asleep. At breakfast, she talked about our classes. She offered to study with me to make up for the other day. I politely refused and told her that I had other plans. Yes, I had other plans; I would work hard to be a writer.

Now the sunrise was more meaningful to me; I had a new purpose in life.

Chapter 12

I was spending most of my time in the university library. I was reading the books that Emily, John, and most importantly Mike recommended. Whenever I thought I wasted my life so far, I stayed at the library longer. There were many books to read: classics, adventure, bestsellers, young adult, and more. I wanted to read all of them.

In the meantime, I was trying not to expose my secret to my family. I wouldn't tell them about my plans until I found a way out. I wasn't even thinking of telling my mother. She wouldn't understand, and she'd tell everything to my dad. And worst of all, she could try to make me come home. My absence didn't seem to be good for Sarp or my mother. My mother said they were fighting with Sarp a lot; she said a monster replaced my formerly sweet brother. I couldn't figure out what the problem was, but our conversations kept getting shorter.

About every three days I went to Mike's room. He was helping me with what I wrote. He gave me extra homework so that I could master English and find my own writing style. He was very positive and encouraging, but his attitude did not diminish my mistakes. My writing was the biggest of the problems, but Mike often said that it was very natural, and the more I read, the better I would write. Many days, I cursed that my native language wasn't English.

When I went to talk to him about my homework on Wednesday before Halloween, Mike said, "I have good news for you!"

"Have I not made any spelling mistakes?" I asked.

"No, it's better news!"

"You talked to my dad and he agreed that I could change departments?"

"No, that's something you'll do. Guess you're not gonna find the good news unless I tell you. A 100% scholarship will be given to a student who switches to our department in the interim period between semesters!"

"What's the good news? I could never win that scholarship."

"How can you be so sure? Are you saying that all the work we've done is useless?"

Mike was angry with me. He had supported me since I decided to become a writer; he had helped me. I was even thinking of giving him a fountain pen with a gold tip as a gift, but I never told anyone about it.

“Do you think they would take someone whose native language is not English?” I asked.

“I read the assignments of my native English students every day. Please trust me.”

It was very obvious he was not saying these words for the hell of it. I couldn't keep my tears in, but I asked the question I wanted to ask him from the very beginning.

“Why are you helping me?” I said. “Why are you wasting so much time on me when you have so many students?”

He answered my question with a surprised, even resentful expression: “Are you not my friend? Friends help each other. It's ridiculous for you to ask that question.”

But when did I become such good friends with him? I didn't know much about Emily, Mike, and John, nor did they about me. We often talked about literature and movies, discussing abstract concepts such as friendship, justice, and love. Sometimes they would ask me how these worked in Turkey, but they did not ask questions about topics such as our personal love lives.

“Well, I'm very grateful. I'm very happy, but I'm a little scared,” I said, my tears pouring more quickly.

“You should be afraid!” he said. “I'm scared, too, because life can be scary, ugly, and bad. But you can't live your life being scared and worrying about bad scenarios. You must fight and see what happens. Listen, do you like writing?”

I nodded my head yes.

“Do you like to read?”

I nodded again. I didn't want to talk while crying.

“Then you're on the right path for you right now. In time, you will find what you want to write, what story you want to tell. Then everything will be more enjoyable for you.”

“But Emily and John are always telling me how hard the courses are, and how much time the homework takes. I'm afraid I won't succeed.”

“Nothing is easy in this life. You're going to deal with the challenges, and you'll learn through trial and error. I had the same concerns 15 years ago. Look at me now: I've learned the subtleties of creative writing, and I tell my students how to express themselves better. I'm still concerned about my writing, but there is no right or wrong about this. We are just talking about how you can write better, and how to communicate better with readers. Don't worry. You're on a good road right now. Just start thinking about the article you'll send for the scholarship application.”

“What kind of a thing do I have to write?”

“It must be something specific to you. If people are sincere in writing, that sincerity is reflected. Trust me, there is nothing to be afraid of. Be sure of yourself and start thinking about your essay.” His expression was softened; his blue eyes were shining with joy.

But I quickly forgot about the department change and the essay after I left his room. Friday evening was Halloween, and I was going to a costume party with Emily. Emily wanted to be a character from a Tim Burton movie. I couldn't tell her that she already looked like that in her daily life and that she shouldn't make any effort. I just tried to convince her she could be the bride in *The Corpse Bride* and that she could handle it with a few makeup tricks.

I wanted to be a fairy tale hero, but I couldn't decide what I was going to do because all the costumes I found would have made me look like an actress in a porn film.

On Thursday, while we were trying to create costumes, sighing and whining, Emily dropped the book in her hand on the bed.

“Look, why don't you be Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*?” she asked, staring at my hair. “Your hair is already blond. It would be complete with a blue dress and a ribbon.”

“Well, it's just a bottle job.” I said. My hair was really brown; I needed a touch-up at the roots. It looked completely neglected.

“What difference does it make? You can be a complete Alice with makeup. You can even be zombie Alice if you want to match me!”

Emily was right; I could be Alice with a blue dress. But she was more right than that: I really was Alice in Wonderland. I came to America almost without thinking, just because of my father. Alice also followed the White Rabbit without thinking and found a completely different world. She came across different things, jumping from adventure to adventure. I was in America, thousands of kilometers away from my home. I was in the middle of a desert, embarking on adventures without knowing how they would go. Since I loved the idea of dressing up as Alice, I left the dorm to go shopping.

I ran into Semra on the way. I was going to say hello but she turned her head away from me and went into the dorm immediately. It was the first time I had seen her in weeks. I didn't understand why she ignored me. Maybe Abdullah told her how he touched me and how, like an idiot, I let him do it. When I remembered the whole thing again, I felt terrible, but when I found a dress at the mall like Alice's blue dress, I forgot everything.

Chapter 13

I was so excited Friday night that I couldn't even eat. Even if I could eat, though, I wouldn't have, because it would've messed up my makeup. After all, this was my first college party, and I wanted this night to be amazing.

After thousands of selfies had been taken at my insistence, me as Alice and Emily as the Corpse Bride, we left the dorm. It was like a colorful playground outside. Everyone was in costume and saying "Trick or treat!" to each other. Even the entrance of the dorm was adorned with pumpkins and fake spider webs. John had said that he would spend the entire weekend reading *Anna Karenina* in his dorm room because he found Halloween childish. Although I insisted, he wouldn't change his mind. Mike answered our invitation with only a laugh.

The party we were going to started at 10 p.m. at the pub we always went to. Emily said that everybody would be drunk by midnight. That night, in spite of the innocence of my Wonderland costume, Alice decided to drink. Just like outside, the pub was stuffy. We were hanging out with Emily's friends whom I thought were from her department. I couldn't even recognize anyone; everyone was different tonight!

When Emily said she was going to have a drink, I said, "I'll come with you and get a beer, too!" Emily was so surprised she laughed, the Corpse Bride revived.

"In the honor of today, the first drinks are on me," she said. "You wait here!"

When she returned, she brought huge glasses with something white on the rims. Realizing that I was trying to figure out what it was, she said, "Margaritas are my favorite. It's the perfect drink for celebrations."

Everyone gathered in a group and toasted "Cheers!" I was surprised by the sweet-sour taste. The large salt particles on the edge of the drink constantly sparked my desire to drink more. After the first margarita, I started to have a good time; I even started to dance with the group. A girl in heavy makeup and a fluffy suit that looked from the Victorian era brought me another drink that I thought was a margarita.

Holding my glass, we left the pub, a guy with a Frankenstein costume at my side and Emily walking in front of us and smiling from time to time. When we came to the garden of the student clubhouse where the party was held, everyone dispersed. Frankenstein was gone; this time SpongeBob was here. He insisted that I sit next to him on the grass. After many SpongeBob jokes and laughs, he held my hand and took me to the dance floor. I laughed as we danced, his hands around my waist, and was not disturbed when his fingers slipped down. The last thing I remember about that night was Spongebob, a guy in a Patrick costume, and I dancing so close.

Patrick wanted me to thank him with a kiss for bringing me a drink, and Sponge Bob was saying I should kiss him instead.

When I woke up in the morning, I had to shut my eyes. Everything was very bright, and even breathing hurt. I could feel my head spinning. When I moved to a sitting position with my eyes closed, I felt the warmth of someone next to me. If I could have screamed, I would have, but when I opened my eyes, I realized it wasn't necessary. I was lying in a double bed with Emily in a bright room. We were still wearing our costumes and makeup from last night.

I felt like I was being stuck all over with needles, and the red bucket placed next to the bed called me to throw up. I had to find the toilet right away, if not use the bucket. The world felt like it was destroyed physically and spiritually.

“I will never drink again!” I said.

“Good morning to the star of the night!” said Emily in her usual quiet voice.

When I was done with the red bucket, I said, panicked, "Where are we?"

"Do you not remember?" Emily asked. "Mike came to get us. We're in his house on his bed. He suggested I sleep here so I could be with you if you vomited."

I almost cried; who knows what Mike thought? SpongeBob and Patrick who wanted me to kiss them and shamelessly touched me at every turn... What did I do last night?

“What happened?” I asked. “Why did he come to pick us up? Did I make a fuss?”

“No, you were having a lot of fun,” Emily said calmly, looking for her cigarette and lighter. “I called Mike when you came to me and told me to save you from SpongeBob and Patrick. I drank too much. I couldn’t save you from anyone.” She finally found her cigarette and lighter. She showed me to the bathroom; she gave me towels and spare clothing from the bedroom, which was very tidy.

The bathroom was clean and tidy as well. The soap next to the sink reminded me of my bathroom at home in Istanbul. I felt better and more relaxed after more vomiting, crying, and feelings of embarrassment in the bathroom.

When I went to the kitchen, Emily and Mike were talking about a writer I hadn't heard of before.

"Guess Alice is back from Wonderland?" Mike asked, smiling widely. But his smile didn't ease me. On the contrary, I wanted to curl up and die.

"I am so sorry," I said.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"This is all... I mean, last night when I was drunk, Emily called you and we slept in your bed."

"Please, relax, you've done nothing to apologize for. You thanked me a thousand times last night. I even got a kiss from you for saving you from SpongeBob and Patrick!"

I got drunk and kissed my potential teacher! Oh dear!

"I will never get drunk again!" I repeated, and both of them burst into laughter. Emily made breakfast of coffee and pancakes, and when she went to the bathroom she was singing "Never say never!"

Mike was so cute when he brought me breakfast.

"Thank you very much," I said. "I feel like I'm at home. Except our breakfast is nothing like pancakes and coffee." We were both cheerful now, and we laughed when I told him about my memories of last night.

Mike had lived in the house for years; he used to have a roommate who was a doctor but when he moved out, he didn't want another roommate. The house was filled with bookshelves and pots with beautiful plants. He had a tabby cat named Greg. Greg slept beside me while we

chatted with coffee in our hands, buried in a cozy sofa. I was sorry when Emily said we had to go because she had homework. I could have stayed in that house forever and died in peace.

Chapter 14

Days were passing but I could not decide what to write. In order to earn a scholarship and be able to change departments, I had to hand in my submission December 1. I had a month, but I was getting tenser every day. I had a plane home to Istanbul on December 15, where I would stay for a month. Even though I missed my mother, my home, and everything, the idea of going back was making me very nervous. Going home to Istanbul meant I had to confront my parents.

Emily wasn't around much. Either she came home late or didn't come home at all. On the nights she didn't come home, I wanted to ask if she stayed at Mike's house, but I couldn't ask. For some reason it made me uneasy thinking of her with Mike in that beautiful house. John was often locked in seclusion because of his lessons and projects. At least he was texting and keeping us all updated.

One day I went to Mike's room, and he asked me about the application. I didn't want to tell him how desperate I was or that all his efforts were for nothing. But he must have understood from my expression.

"Look, Merve, you have a very interesting life story," he said. "You lived in Istanbul, the most interesting city in the world, and now you are in a different world. You can tell us about this experience through a fictional story about a character."

"Yeah, but I've never seen Istanbul as you did," I said. "I didn't even go to most of the places you mentioned. I've been with the same friends since I started going to nursery school. Then my life changed, and I found myself here."

"That's it! Write about your own life; write for us. We are all heroes of our own novels, and the pages of our novels are progressing every day. Use imaginary characters if you want, but

please write. I'm sure you can do it, and you can even change the flow of events, if necessary, and exaggerate.”

Me coming here—what happened before and after—and everyone around me, even Abdullah, was a character worth telling a story about. Though I wasn't sure if I would write Abdullah.

“Okay, I'll try. My next visit will be very different!”

“I know you can do it,” he said. “Let's go to the library.”

When I arrived at the library, thousands of thoughts ran through my mind. How must I start? I had scribbled something the first day I started writing, but they were a bunch of inconsistent and irregular thoughts. I opened my computer and a new file, and I started writing.

A message notification came. My first and last love Aytekin, who turned my life upside down, had sent me a message: *Hi Merve, what's up?*

I opened the message without thinking, because he was not in my friends list. He said hi as if nothing had happened and as if I hadn't unfriended him on Facebook. Immediately I checked the relationship status in Sumru's profile, and I realized she had completely removed that section. She had removed thousands of photos of herself and Aytekin, in which they had seemed to be like Siamese twins. This indicated that they had a fight and broke up.

Because he saw that I had read the message, I had to answer. I couldn't look more like a loser.

Hi, I'm fine. What's up with you?

When I sent the message, my cheeks flushed, like every time I talked to him. How ridiculous it was to blush when we were so far away and just texting. He sent me a friend request as soon as I sent the message. So he knew I unfriended him.

Wow, you unfriended me when you went to America then, he said.

It was all his fault that I unfriended him, but he didn't know I liked him. I felt worthless, as if he was facing me and asking me for explanation. After a few minutes that passed like hours, I wrote: *I thought you were sulking. Sorry. How do you know that I'm in America?*

Sumru told me. She even showed me a picture of you that was very beautiful. You're blond now. It suits you.

Don't say that... your girlfriend may get angry.

She's not my girlfriend, we broke up. Do you have a boyfriend or something?

This question made my hands sweaty. What did it mean? He wouldn't have been able to harass me like Abdullah. Maybe he wanted to be friends? Maybe he liked me?

I don't have a boyfriend.

You couldn't find a blond cowboy there?

He began to like my photos as soon as I accepted the friendship request. Our conversation continued as before, with childish jokes. I didn't ask why he had ignored me for a year and a half because I was so happy. I stopped writing and thinking about writing; I was messaging with Aytakin for hours. I tried to write while he was sleeping but did not even come close to what I wanted to write. Every time we talked Aytakin told me how he looked forward to my arrival in Istanbul. We were talking about what we were going to do. I was looking forward to the holiday as if Pelin and Sumru never existed; only the two of us went to the same high school and flirted.

I'd been ignoring Mike's calls and giving him excuses. When he invited me to lunch, I told him I was trying to complete my writing, so I shouldn't disturb my concentration. But Aytakin had already stolen my concentration. The lessons, the future, did not worry me anymore. I felt bad whenever I thought of Mike. I didn't want to disappoint him or let him down, but all I could think of was hooking up with Aytakin in Istanbul.

One day when I told Aytakin about my desire to change departments and become a writer, he was very happy.

Since you want to change departments, I'm sure you can study in İstanbul, too.

He sent a presentation of the Turkish Language and Literature department of the university where he studied. When I told him that this wasn't the same thing as the creative writing department; he said, *Don't be ridiculous. Wouldn't you still become a writer in the end?*

Yes, I could have become a writer by studying at either of them. And I wouldn't have to get a scholarship or be away from my mother.

Chapter 15

It was December when the weather finally cooled down. I had no problems with the weather and no worries about the fact that I missed the application date. When I didn't answer Mike's calls, he stopped calling. Emily was so busy that she believed everything I said. John really was like the walking dead because of his lessons.

I gave up writing a few weeks ago, and I stopped reading, too. Instead, I was thrilled to buy gifts. Every place was decorated for Christmas,; wandering in the shopping centers had become more enjoyable. Sarp called me every day, reminding me what he wanted me to buy for him.

I was very excited to see Aytakin. He lived alone near the university. On video chat, he showed me his house and invited me to visit. I was buying presents for him and his house. On the other hand, I was wondering how I was going to pack everything.

On December 2, Emily came to our dorm room and said, "You didn't turn in an application."

I didn't know what to say.

“What changed your mind?” she asked. “Did you speak to your father? What happened?”

“I’m very confused. I guess I will come back here after the holiday.”

“What? Your family wanted you go back home?”

“No. I don’t want to come back.”

Curiosity yielded to surprise.

“I haven't been able to help you lately,” Emily said. “I know, and I'm really sorry about that. But whatever decision you make, I'm here. I'm sure John thinks the same thing as me.”

Neither of us wanted to bring up Mike, I guessed.

Aytekin kept telling me that Mike was just trying to have sex with me. Although he had never tried to do so, that did not mean that he would not, and Aytekin had said, “Don’t trust men. Watch out. I'm sure they're all trying to get you into bed.”

I couldn't tell him what happened with Abdullah, but the way he talked frightened me. I had behaved shamefully to Mike, and was too afraid to talk to him.

On the morning of December 15, Emily and John had come to say goodbye to me in front of the dorm. The two of them bought me a Christmas present; they told me to open the gift on the plane.

“Well, I didn't get you a gift,” I said. “I’m so embarrassed. We could have had an early Christmas dinner, but I knew you were busy. Please tell Mike I said hello.”

“Are you sure you won't come back?” John asked, sticking his hands in his pockets.

“Mike would want to see you, too.”

I wanted to die.

“I’m supposed to be returning on January 12 because my plane ticket was bought in advance, but I'm not sure what I’m going to do. Let's talk often, okay?” I wanted to say goodbye

by hugging them, as I'm used to, but my hands remained at my sides. I guessed I wouldn't get used to it even if I was going to live here for a thousand years.

As soon as I got to the airport, I opened the gift; they gave me an ereader! Moreover, John, Emily, and Mike had made book lists for me on it. Everybody added their favorite books to the list. I felt worse. The whole time, these three people were very kind to me, trying to make me feel at home. I had almost stopped talking to them; I was focused on my own love life. Mike helped me a lot, and I didn't even thank him. I didn't get them Christmas gifts as I planned; I had spent all my money on Aytekin.

When I got on the plane, I felt so much remorse I thought it would kill me, but instead I slept like I was dead. It was as if by sleeping I could run from my problems.

Chapter 16

When I arrived in Istanbul, other problems were waiting for me. Mom, Dad, and Sarp greeted me at the airport. We exchanged fake smiles and behaved as if we were a real family. My mother was visibly weak and looked very tired. Sarp's longer but still childish face had not changed that much. My father was still nervous, and he was talking and moving fast. We were in a fight before I knew what had happened, before we'd even gotten in the car, over whether we were going to have dinner at home or out. It was surprising that I hadn't been in such a fight for a long time, and I was once again the quiet Merve I used to be.

On the other hand, I was very excited about the following day. I was going to meet Aytekin and walk on the beach and then go to a sweet café I had seen in films but had never visited. I wanted to dive into the sweet daydream, but the Kırıcı family couldn't agree, and more screaming came. It was finally decided to eat at home. My mother made one of my favorite dishes, but my dad was sulking because we didn't go to the clubhouse he went to every evening.

When I gave Sarp his gifts, he disappeared. When my father went to his room to change, my mother came up to me in anger.

“He was going to show off,” she said. “That’s why he kept insisting on the clubhouse. He thinks he climbed the social ladder when he sent his daughter to America.”

I felt terrible. It was the first time I saw my mother talking so angrily about my father. There was always a fight and shouting in the house, but I’d never seen my mother talk like that.

When bedtime came, I ran to my room and grabbed my phone. Aytekin hadn’t sent any messages since I arrived. After the third message I sent, he sent a message saying, *Sorry, I had a test today. In fact, I have a test tomorrow, too. Do you want us to meet after?* I was disappointed, but I was glad I had time to go to the salon. As my mother insisted, we could now spend the day together just like old times.

When Aytekin said he had another exam the next day, I almost cried. He said he had to work when I asked if there was a problem, but that I could join him later if I wanted to. I was relieved, and told him of course I would come. It would be better to go to his home first; otherwise I would have had difficulty carrying the gifts I bought him.

It was hard to find his house. The house was on the European side of the city, and I didn’t know anything about that area. I thought he’d pick me up in his car when I went to the European side by ferry, but I assumed he didn’t offer so he could study more.

I thought I would die when he opened his door. I was so excited to see the man I fell in love with in his house like an adult. He hadn’t changed since the last time I saw him. He hugged me tightly and he kissed my hair and then my cheeks. He was surprised by the gifts I got for him. His expression changed with each package he opened.

“I haven’t bought you a gift,” he said, “What a shame.” When I said it didn’t matter, he said. “No, no, I will make up for it.” He got wine from the kitchen.

After filling our glasses, he said, "To reuniting!"

I had already told Aytekin that I swore not to drink again after Halloween. I guess it slipped his mind, and he raised his glass with enthusiasm. I didn't want to offend him. I had to learn not to offend him, if we were going to date. When we were drinking the wine, we were silent for a long while. I didn't know what to say. I could only smile. Aytekin was sitting next to me, smiling and playing with my hair. Every time he said, "You are so beautiful. You flourished in America," I blushed and thanked him awkwardly.

I was warming under the influence of the wine, and I was getting drowsy. I put my head on Aytekin's shoulder and closed my eyes. Half awake, half asleep, I asked, "Why did you choose Sumru; why didn't you choose me?"

"I wish I had chosen you," he said, caressing my face.

Before I could open my eyes he started kissing me. It wasn't like Abdullah's kiss, with so much licking. He was kissing me very softly and caressing my face and neck. I thought I was dreaming, but the touch was real. These were of love, of affection—they had no resemblance to those perverse and hungry touches. When we stopped kissing to finish our wine, he pulled me into his lap.

That's when I was the happiest girl in the world. The man I was in love with, the one I had waited for years to win, finally wrapped me with love and compliments. After we finished our drinks, he took me by the hand and led me to the bedroom. My mind wasn't working properly, but I knew what that meant. I let him strip me slowly. With every piece of clothing he took off, I winced, and he smiled.

When he was undressed, I saw an adult man naked for the first time in my life. If I hadn't drunk that much wine, I might have wanted time to get used to it, but I tried to hide my fear by smiling.

“You are... You are my...” I started to say, but he gave me a hard kiss without letting me finish my sentence. He knew what to do, and from the moment we were naked, his movements became more confident. I surrendered to him with a smile on my face.

When I opened my eyes again, it was dark, and there was no light in the room. I couldn't see anything except a light on my phone. Aytekin was half dressed and writing something on his phone.

“Good morning,” he said, looking at me with a faint smile. His words didn't show how long I slept or what time it was. Panicked, I grabbed my phone. It was 6 p.m. I didn't know how long we were lying in this state, but I was feeling dizzy because of the wine and my every move hurt.

When Aytekin saw my face crumple, he left his phone and kissed my cheek.

“It is normal that it hurts the first time,” he said. “It will be all right in a few days.”

As if being naked beside a half-naked man was not embarrassing enough, these words made me blush more.

“Let me take you home,” he said, picking up my clothes from the floor and giving them to me.

Chapter 17

Aytekin's exams were still going on, and so whenever I could, I went to his house. My mother was whining like a little boy, insisting I go shopping or to the club with her. The night after I arrived, my parents and I went to the club, and my father introduced me to everyone as if I was from outer space. I knew almost all of the people and had seen them there six months ago. But now I had a new label: the daughter of the Kırıcı family who's studying in America who came home for vacation.

As my father did this, I had cramps in my stomach, and I was ashamed. As my mother said, he was showing me off. But my mother was doing the same thing as she dragged me with her everywhere.

On one of the evenings we went to the club, my father announced that I would be the new financier of our company; he introduced it to the whole world. How would I tell my father that I wanted to be a writer?

I didn't have the nerve to say so yet, but I made up my mind. This year I was going to prepare for the university exam again and I was going to apply to one of the literary departments at Aytekin's university. Yet even Aytekin did not know of my decision; he neither asked me out nor said he wanted to be my boyfriend. What we did was no different from what couples did, but I still didn't want to interrogate him during his intense exams.

He didn't drive me home like he did on the first day. He said I could use the Metrobus so I could go home without being stuck in traffic. Even though I was offended by this, I said, "You study for the exams, and then we'll have fun."

A few days after New Year's, my grades were announced. Except for the Society and Culture course, I couldn't pass the other six. This was not a surprise to me, but I was surprised by my grade for the Society course, to get an A, the highest grade. When I said to myself, "That's what happens when I like my class!" I thought of Aytekin again.

Today he had his exam at 1:30 p.m.; it would be nice to surprise him. He could take me to the literature department and give me a tour.

I left the house excitedly with this idea; the weather was very cold and the wind was blowing from the sea. It wasn't a nice day to walk around, but we could go to his home and open a bottle of wine. The campus was somewhere in the back streets of Beyoğlu, so I decided to go there by taxi. At the entrance, I told security I was visiting my friend and gave his name. He told

me that the exam week hadn't started but that I could find him in the campus canteen or a secluded corner, and he laughed.

I was surprised that a security guard knew so much about Aytekin, but I couldn't ask him more. I went to the crowded place I thought a canteen, but according to the students I asked, there was also a Starbucks. It had a large sitting area that was very crowded as well. I was calling Aytekin while I wandered around, but he wasn't picking up his phone. When I looked behind the barista, the phone fell from my hand.

Aytekin had a girl with long blond hair in his lap, and they were kissing intensely. He had one hand on her slim hip, which was covered in shiny leggings, and the other hand entered through the generously open portion of her cream-colored sweater and could not be seen. There was no one else there, and nothing except the sofa and coffee table. When I dropped my phone, the kissing couple were startled and looked at me. The blond girl looked at me but didn't get up from Aytekin's lap.

"Merve? What are you doing here?" she said confusedly.

While I was trying to collect my phone's cover, which had broken into pieces, the fact that the girl was Sumru hit me with a shock. I opened my mouth, but the words didn't spill out. Aytekin had lifted Sumru from his lap and was straightening his clothes. There was no expression on his face that anything was wrong.

"I... I... I wanted to surprise..." I couldn't talk. What could I say? *Dear Sumru, guess you reunited with your ex-boyfriend, I've come to congratulate you. Or I wanted to see you, Ateykin, because you're overwhelmed with exams—but I see that you are too busy.*

I ran away from campus without another word. Unlike in the movies, a man didn't run after me, yelling, "Stop! It wasn't what you think!" All the way home, I cried and thought about how stupid I felt. The last time I looked at Facebook, but there was no sign that Aytekin and

Sumru were in a relationship. And there was no such sign on Sumru's account either. But when I got home, I took Sarp's tablet, and I saw that Aytekin's relationship with Sumru started before I returned from America. I learned all the details of the relationship while I cried in Sarp's room.

Probably Sumru didn't know that Aytekin was also seeing me, and every time Aytekin said he had an exam, he was with Sumru. Why, then, instead of going home, were they in Starbucks and hidden places as the security guard said? I fell asleep crying.

I spent the days after the incident wandering around my house. My mother was the only one who noticed the shift in my mood, and she didn't give me a hard time, but she kept insulting my father and complaining about him. I was expecting an explanation from Aytekin the day I caught him, and in the days that followed, he'd been silent as death. And his silence doubled my anger.

My anger led me to feel like the walls were closing in around me. One day, I went back to the university in Beyoğlu. When I saw the entrance to the campus, I wiped my last tears and said to myself, *This is the last tear you've shed for Aytekin.*

I found the couple in Starbucks in the same place, but this time I went up to them quietly. They were more decent than they were when I caught them the last time, but they were still in each other's arms.

I put on a fake smile and sat in a chair across them.

"Hello, you two!" I chirped.

They jumped when I spoke and then looked confused. Aytekin opened his mouth to say something, but I spoke first.

"Dear Sumru, dear Aytekin, I'm going back to America in a few days," I said. "I wanted to see you before I left. I'll probably never see you again."

Sumru climbed out of Aytekin's lap and I reached for her, holding her hands across the coffee table.

"My dear Sumru, after my experience in America, I have learned what it means to be real friends," I said. "I realize that you and Pelin were not my friends. You're only meek parasites. You knew I liked Aytekin since the first day he came to our school. I even talked about how much I liked him and cried on your shoulder, wondering why he didn't seem to notice. But you ignored me, and now you're dating him." I smiled at her, but realized I actually felt like smiling. Seeing their confused facial expressions made me happy.

I dropped Sumru's hands and leaned back in my chair, turning to face Aytekin.

"I can't be angry with you," I said. "I was the one who responded to your messages after all. But for the sake of our old friendship, I have to tell Sumru what happened between us."

Aytekin stood up and started to move toward me.

"What happened?" Sumru screeched. "What do you mean? Aytekin, would you sit down?"

I told her everything while Aytekin blushed and murmured uncomfortably.

"Honey, look, I don't blame Aytekin at all," I said. "It's not his fault he didn't develop emotionally. I was the one who offered myself to him on a gold plate. It's a shame that he cheated on both of us, but don't worry—I'm leaving soon."

Sumru's face was white as snow, and she started to shout at Aytekin.

"You shit, you did all these because I wouldn't have sex with you," she shouted. "Because I told you I was saving myself for marriage. I know if I would have come to your home, you would have tricked me into having sex. You bastard! I don't want to see your face again."

They started screaming at each other, and I knew it was time to go. For me, the mystery was solved.

Chapter 18

I was going back to America in a few days, but I still had things to do. As soon as I got home, I sat down at my computer. I would write the essay I had put off writing. I missed my chance for a scholarship, but there was nothing to stop me from writing. I spent hours writing in my room, only coming out to eat. I wrote about my first year in America, my family, Aytekin, and my friends in America—changing their names, of course. I wrote a book.

When I finished, I wrote Mike an email.

I'm totally an idiot. I'm sorry for everything. I will be back in a few days, and I'll make it up to you. I hope you will read the book I wrote; it's about a stupid young girl like me, so I called it Story of a Young Girl. See you soon.

I printed two copies of the book I wrote and placed them in envelopes, one for my mother and the other for my father. My hands shook, but I had to do it. I was going to live the life I wanted. I wrote them each a letter about why I couldn't live the life they were trying to force me to live.

At the airport, I gave my parents the packages. They looked at me in surprise. I told them that they seemed so unhappy because they didn't live the lives they wanted, and that I'd prepared these packages for them, which they should read when I'm gone. I told them it would be the best way to understand me; they only stared at me awkwardly.

As I moved through passport control, I felt like the happiest girl in the world. I was afraid of everything that lay ahead, but I was confident as I walked to my plane.

