

ONE

It started with a phone call. "Ali? Ali Melek? Is that you?"

"Yes," Ali answered a bit hesitantly, The voice, though, sounded vaguely familiar but he could not quite place it. "Who is calling?"

"It's your old professor, Dr. Anday. You remember me, I hope."

And of course Ali remembered him, his mentor from his undergraduate days who guided him through his undergraduate studies and was instrumental in helping him choose the right graduate program in the US for study. "How could I ever forget you?"

"I was hoping you would accept my invitation to speak to my class of business students about foreigners doing business in Turkey. From your website, you seem to have much experience helping them."

"You've seen my website?"

"Yes, and it is professionally done. Did you design it?"

"No, my nephew Burhan. He is a graphic designer."

"Very talented." There was a slight pause before he repeated the invitation.

"Of course," Ali said. "It is a good excuse to see you again."

The meeting, though, was not at a university like Ali expected but in a back room of a community center in Beyoğlu. The group of students were respectful and attentive and Ali enjoyed the Q & A session afterwards which was rather informally held over glasses of çay. Later, however, he could not refrain himself from asking, "You are not teaching at university, hoca?"

"It's a complicated story," Omer explained. "Why don't you and your wife come to dinner at my home and we can catch up on the twists and turns of our respective lives."

And as Ali and his wife Seyda prepared to leave for dinner, she could not help but notice the shifting moods that past over her husband's face as he buttoned his shirt and fumbled with his cufflinks. "Here," she said, calmly taking hold of his hand. "Let me."

And for not the first time that day, nor would it be the last, he sighed thinking how he could not imagine a life without this woman by his side. "I don't know why," he admitted, "I feel such anxiety about this dinner but seeing him reduced to teaching in a corner room of some second-rate language school has caused such grief in my heart."

"That's because he was an important person in your life. Isn't that right, my husband?"

"More important than I can say." He looked off beyond his wife's shoulder to wonder what his life would be now if Omer had not taken such an interest in the backward Black Sea boy sitting in his class and had not mentored him, feeding the hunger for knowledge gnawing at his core.

"Then be grateful, dear, that you have this chance to be in his company once again. And if it is possible, I know you will find a way to help him as once he helped you."

The dinner conversation was laced with many references to books, films, the theatre, and yet Ali could not help noticing an undercurrent of dread, or perhaps depression, tugging at the corners of Omer's wife's mouth, like a nagging fly one could not quite capture or kill. He was also saddened seeing the frayed collar on Omer's shirt and the missing button on his brown, wool cardigan sweater that Ali remembered from his university days. That, along with the grey that dominated his hair and the bags under his eyes pulled at Ali's heartstrings.

After dinner, the two men retired to the balcony to smoke cigarettes and it is there that Omer confesses the reason he had invited Ali to his home. "They have been investigating me for any connections I might have had to FETÖ. It has been going on for some years after the attempted coup and my movements are carefully restricted."

“You?” Ali is taken aback. “Why?”

“Remember I was a dean at one of the universities associated with the Gülen Movement. Even though I left that position two years before the coup, it looked suspicious that I was there for a long time. Twelve years to be exact. And before that, I taught at another Gülen university for a few years. These are connections I cannot hide.”

“But you only worked there. You were never part of that group that followed Gülen.”

“Yes, but anyone even remotely associated with that organization in any way is tainted forever it seems. And with this war on terror, everyone is being looked at with scrutiny.”

And Omer explained how his passport, phone, computer had all been confiscated and he has been ordered to not go anywhere while the investigation is being carried out and he is finally brought to trial whenever that might be. He is fearful of the consequences, having heard horror stories of many of his former colleagues arrested, jailed, or just detained and stripped of their credentials, not being allowed to teach again or hold any position in education or any related field. He is afraid something similar will happen to him. “Which is why I wanted to see you,” he said.

“How can I help?” Ali asked.

“You told me often of your connections to, shall we say, individuals who work outside the law.” He looked at him intently. “Do you still have those connections?”

Ali could not help but feel slightly guilty as he thought of asking The Greek for help again, especially in something clearly illegal. “Well he’s retired now,” he finally said. “And has been for quite a while.”

“But he still must know ways out of the country,” Omer said. “He will help, won’t he, if you ask?”

“Yes,” Ali said somewhat reluctantly. “He will help if I ask.”

“You don’t want to see me as a pariah existing in this legal limbo indefinitely, do you?” Omer implored. “You know I wouldn’t have anything to do with any kind of plot against the government. Signing a petition, attending a rally, is not supporting a coup.” He looked off toward the dining room where their wives sat sipping çay and talking of harmless things. “But the way things are now, with this never-ending war on terror, and all the suspicions, every little seemingly innocent act takes on a more sinister look. And though I am no Gülenist, I have been critical of the government. It could appear, if looked at through the lense of today, that I am culpable.” His eyes grew moist. “You can help me, can’t you?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get me and my family out of the country, to someplace safe where I won’t be extradited.” Again his eyes implored Ali. “I have no one else I can ask, or trust.”

Ali was moved by his request and as he thought of his wife and child in the other room with Seyda, he resolved to do what he could to help his former mentor. But, of course, that would require the help of the old family friend: The Greek.

TWO

During Ali's drive to The Greek's house in Beykoz, he replayed in his head the conversation he hoped to have with him. He knew what he was asking was dangerous and though he hoped The Greek would not refuse to help, he also secretly wished there was some detail he was overlooking that made this request impossible. Though he could not refuse Omer's plea, he did hope The Greek might convince him that it was an impossible task. After all, if anyone knew just what was required to fulfill it, The Greek would know. It was really beyond Ali's ability to see.

Irina, as usual, opened the door with the three legged dog that always accompanied her when at home by her side. She said nothing, but just beckoned him inside and indicated that he should go out the back to the garden where The Greek was tending his flowers. It brought a smile to Ali's lips watching this old smuggler digging in the dirt to plant flowers. He appeared to be like so many other retired men who worked in gardens, fished off bridges, rode the metro for free, and yet Ali knew he was anything but one of them. Just as he knew Irina was not the domestic wife she appeared to be: cooking their meals, cleaning their house, feeding every stray in the neighborhood. They looked normal except for the fact that there was at least a thirty year difference in their ages but that did not in any way affect the obvious affection they

had for each other, nor change the fact that they both had violent pasts they were now trying to forget. But Ali also knew it was times like these when he came asking for The Greek's help that their past could no longer be forgotten but came front and center before them. It was most likely why Ali felt Irina's disapproval of his visits and The Greek's almost reluctant resignation in his offer to assist Ali in whatever problem he could not solve himself., like now.

"Ah Ali," The Greek said as he rose up to greet his guest. "You caught me tending my flowers."

Ali surveyed the small plot and smiled. "I would not have imagined you as a gardener except that I remember those long years ago at the tea farm and you harvesting tea leaves with all of us."

"Yes," The Greek nodded. "Perhaps it all began there. The seed, as they say, was planted in the soil of your family's farm."

"Sometimes I miss those days," Ali said. "Things were so much simpler than."

"It always seems so in retrospect but that view isn't necessarily accurate. Things are always both simple and complex. It is all in how we approach them that makes it so." The Greek smiled. "But surely you didn't come here to watch me putter around in my garden or to discuss life back in Rize. You are here for a different reason, I think."

"Yes," Ali said and almost felt embarrassed to have to continue. "I need your help again."

"And how can I help you?"

"It is about my old university professor. He is in trouble and asked me for help."

"And to help him you need me to help you?"

“Yes.” Ali’s embarrassment turns to shame. “He needs to cross the border into Europe without going through normal procedures.”

“I see,” The Greek said. He looked at Irina who had just entered the yard carrying two glasses of çay on a tray. Their eyes met and Irina, without the slightest indication of how she felt, conveyed to him nevertheless her disapproval.

“Why don’t we sit over there on the patio, drink our tea, and you can explain everything.”

And so they sat, drank, and Ali told The Greek about Omer and the trouble he was in and what he had asked Ali to do to help him get out of it.

“Can you help me, Abi, help him and his family?” Ali asked.

The Greek sat still for a long moment considering the ramifications of smuggling a possible enemy of the state out of the country versus helping the youngest son of his late best friend. There was no way he could walk away from either action feeling he did the right thing which only complicated his response. “I have never smuggled anything or anyone for that matter out of the country. Though it seems easy just to reverse the pattern, it isn’t necessarily so. And, you must know, I haven’t smuggled anything in a very long time. I am retired.”

“I know, Abi, and it troubles me to ask for your help but I have nowhere else to go and know nothing about how to proceed.”

“This person is that important to you?”

“Yes, Abi. Without his support during my university days, I never would have gone to the US to study. He was my mentor and I owe him so very much.”

The Greek studied his young friend for a long time. Then he sighed. "I'll see what I can do. But no promises until I've talked to a few people still in the game. Okay?"

"Thank you, Abi." And Ali kissed The Greek's hand. "Thank you so much."

After Ali left, The Greek sat staring pensively at the garden, thinking his short-lived days of planting flowers was over. Irina meanwhile came out and stood behind him on the patio. She absently massaged his shoulders as she, too, looked almost wistfully at the garden. Even the three legged dog seemed to sense a change in their moods and laid by her feet. A slight breeze blew in from the sea and The Greek took off his hat to feel the wind in his hair.

"I don't like this," Irina said. "I see no good coming from helping him and his professor."

The Greek sighed and reached back to take her hand in his. He pulled her forward to face him and smiled. "You are right," he said. "It is a foolish thing to help anyone accused of being a traitor in times like these. But I see no way to avoid helping Ali, regardless of the consequences."

"I know," she said. "But I do not like it, nor do I like the fact that he asked you."

"Who else would he come to with this trouble?"

"Always you, my lion, and though I know of your alligence to that family, I also know what he asks is more than usual. And I must be honest and tell you I resent that about him. He only comes when he needs help but never for a social visit. Does he ever invite us to dinner with his wife and his child? Does he ever come by just to see how you are, to have çay, to talk of things unrelated to his problems? Never," she said almost bitterly. "Only when he needs you

to do something dangerous. But this is not looking for some lost person or going up against the Russian or Turkish mobs. This is illegal.”

“I’ve lived most of my adult life doing things that are illegal.” And though he still smiled, there was a touch of sorrow in his eyes. “Why not this, too?”

“Because it is not just against the police this time but the army and the government. This involves those possibly associated with the attempted coup. It involves those possibly linked to FETÖ. This is not something you should involve yourself in.”

“I am, as usual, touched by your concern. But I see no way to avoid helping him. After all, he says they are innocent.”

“Ali is looking at his former professor with his student’s eyes. That was a long time ago. People change or maybe they don’t change but we fail to see just who they really are because of our emotional attachment to them. Isn’t this possibly the case here?”

“I don’t know without meeting the man myself but first let me talk with Baris and Sergei. If I do this, I will need their help.”

“If you do this?”

“Yes, if.” He smiled at her. “Now come here and sit on my lap and let’s not talk about this anymore. Let’s just look into each other’s eyes and forget the world outside.”

Irina smiled, too. “Okay, my lion, but remember: whatever you do, you do it with me, not without. Understand?”

He nodded. “Understood.”

And they lost themselves in each other’s arms.

