Summer Heat

Also by Defne Suman

The Silence of Scheherazade
At the Breakfast Table

Summer Heat

Defne Suman

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In memory of my father… of course

PART ONE

1

Bloody Church

Petro and I met for the first time at the Bloody Church.

It was his idea. I thought it was a coincidence. I agreed immediately, excited by the location and the old memories it would evoke: many years earlier, my grandmother Safinaz had lived in a three-storey stone house directly across from the church. My father and I used to visit her every Saturday, and when I pulled back her curtains and peeped out, I could see its red dome. The entrance was almost impossible to locate, concealed within a high wall beneath a tangle of honeysuckle vines. The door was kept locked most of the time; you had to find Pavli, the caretaker, to open it.

But nothing about our meeting was coincidental.

It was a hot summer's evening, so hot that even the leaves were parched, their edges curled. Out on Buyukada Island, where I was staying for the summer, the pine forests were on fire, the flames racing across the dark green hills and turning them to desert in the space of an hour. It was stifling in the centre of Istanbul. I sweated my way up the slope to the Bloody Church, stopping to catch my breath under the fig trees of my childhood. In the years since I'd last been in that

neighbourhood the trees had grown quite a bit, their thick, dry branches contorted into strange shapes as they reached for the sun along the walls, the steps and the tin roofs. I was annoyed with myself for having taken this job in the middle of summer, as if I were a penniless university student excited to be paid for showing a tourist around the city. What was I thinking, exchanging my cool, breezy house on Buyukada, where my husband would happily make me a glass of ice-cold mint lemonade, for this sweaty trip to the city in the heat?

Petro Paraskos, the man I was due to meet in front of the Bloody Church, was a documentary film producer. He wanted to explore some Byzantine churches for a new project he had in mind and had come across my name when searching online for an art historian to accompany him. Would I be his guide? It was a strange proposal; I should have been suspicious from the start. Even though I'd written my master's thesis on churches of the late Byzantium era, I wasn't a well-known art historian – I had no articles published in international journals – so it was odd that my name had even come up. Perhaps I should also have queried his tone throughout our correspondence – was it too insistent, too assertive, even pushy? For example, he'd guessed that it would be tiring for me to come into the city from Buyukada Island every day, so suggested booking a space for me in the hotel where he was staying. Time was short and his budget was generous enough to cover an extra room. This sort of arrangement had worked well on previous assignments, he said. If it was convenient for me, we could meet on July 19th at 7 p.m. in front of the Bloody Church.

Ah, Melike, you disregarded all the signs! You ignored the voice inside your head, which whispered that your meeting with this stranger would alter the course of your fate, and

jumped on a ferry to the city for the possibility of some momentary pleasure.

A woman must nourish her soul, keep her spirit fresh with little adventures, right? One man is never enough. (Who had said that? Was it grandma Safinaz?). But that was not what I was thinking as I traipsed up to my grandma's old neighbourhood to meet Petro that evening. I wasn't going to cheat on Sinan ever again. I had made that decision. I was tired, worn out. It wasn't just the keeping of secrets, being clandestine about everything and planning my moves several steps ahead in these delicate games of chess. Even more exhausting was having to deal with the offended hurt of men who would, initially, declare that they had 'no expectations', only to persist in pursuing me once we'd slept together. Where such affairs were meant to be a liberation, an escape from daily life, they had instead become just another burden. I had neither the desire nor the energy for new loves. Also, love, I had realized, as with many other pleasures, lost its flavour with repetition; in the end, it was always the same. If I was looking for novelty, I needed to shift my attention inwards, closer to home. I would be turning forty in a month. In this new phase of my life, I would discover not how many conquests I could have, but how to enjoy fidelity.

So, just that morning, instead of slipping out of the house before Sinan woke up and hurrying to Uncle Niko's bakery, where I usually had my morning tea and pastry and played sudoku, I waited under the white mosquito netting for my husband to stir. Uncle Niko, who was familiar with my grumpy morning state, always set down my breakfast on my table beside the window without greeting me, then returned to his portable radio behind the till. Sinan, on the other hand, was very talkative in the morning. He woke up with

a hundred worldly and otherworldly ideas, rattling them off like machinegun fire before he even lifted his head from the pillow. From now on, though, I was going to listen to my husband's brilliant early-morning schemes with patience and smiles.

Leaving him was the last thing on my mind.

As was finding my father.

At no stage in my life had I wanted to find my father. Not during the tearful nights of my childhood when I used to secretly mourn his absence, nor in my adolescence when I might momentarily catch his aftershave on the skin of a lover I was kissing on a rickety jetty over the dark waters of the Bosphorus. When I smelled that scent, a wave would swell inside me like a tide rising in the moonlight, but even that didn't make me want to track him down to learn why – and for what new life – he had abandoned us. Why would I feel that need now? Twenty-nine years had passed since then. That morning on Buyukada, listening to Sinan's breathing, my father was not among the thoughts passing through my mind. I had closed the Orhan Kutsi chapter of my life a long time ago.

The first thing I saw were Petro's lips. He was standing in front of the red church, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun, trying to figure out if the person coming round the corner was me. His lips were a dark pink beneath the orange sky. Too dark, too pink for a man. The word '*palikari*' came into my head. How did I know that evocative Greek word for 'a young man in his prime', I wondered? Surely those lips, the colour of unplucked cherries, indicated that he was hot-blooded.

Recognizing me, he smiled. No, it wasn't a smile – he laughed. Sunlight glinted and then faded in his huge, honey-coloured eyes. When I held out my hand for him to shake, he drew me in and hugged me. We embraced like two friends who hadn't seen each other in years. He was a tall, broad-shouldered mountain of a man. My head barely came up to his chest. Why did I always expect men who were younger than me to be small? (Yes, when I'd looked for Petro's photo online, I'd also checked his date of birth.) Was it because I couldn't quite accept my own age?

When we came out of our hug, Petro put his hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes. There was something searching about his gaze. My heart raced.

'Shall we start right away? I have tons of things to ask you.'

His tone was hurried, but he spoke in a crisp British accent. What a surprise! During our email exchange I'd given him a voice with a Greek accent (a man with a name like Petro Paraskos had to be of Greek origin, surely!), emphasizing the 'h's and struggling with the 'sh's and 'ch's.

Luckily for us, the door into the church complex was open. This surprised me. The old caretaker Pavli would never in his life have left it unlocked. The honeysuckle vine that used to obscure the entrance was long gone as well. Petro and I filed into the neglected courtyard. Cool air licked our faces, as if the sun that had scorched every living thing beyond the walls hadn't visited the place all summer long. There was an old tricycle lying in a shadowy corner, beside a dry well with a moss-encrusted lid. Mosquitoes perched on a sagging, discoloured washing line which had been strung across the yard.

Petro didn't waste time on the courtyard, but pushed open

the glass-panelled door and went into the church. I followed him. Light from the chandelier spread a strange glow across the red carpet. Thin swirls of incense smoke rose from the iconostasis; two tall yellow candles were burning in front of the altar. Since services were no longer held here, I wondered who had lit the lamp, the candles, the incense, and for what reason. Petro approached the altar table. Pressing the tips of the first three fingers of his right hand together, he made the sign of the cross, then bent forward and kissed the picture of the Virgin Mary on the gilded white cloth.

We stood side by side on the faded red carpet under the companionable gaze of the saints. He leant towards me and whispered, 'I want to know everything…'

I lifted my head and looked at him. In contrast to his huge body and strong chin, his face was like that of a curious child. When he smiled, he revealed an orderly row of white teeth.

'… about the church, of course.' A mischievous gleam shone in his eyes.

Suddenly I felt like a student who'd not done her homework, for I really had not prepared for this tour. It had been more than ten years since I'd defended my master's thesis, and I found myself scrambling for any knowledge to share with Petro. I could easily talk about the symbols which adorned the edges of the silver icons on the walls, the reasons for the specific order in which the pictures of the saints had been organized, the mystical geometry of particular architectural features that only religious scholars could interpret. But I couldn't remember what was unique about the Bloody Church. I knew that it had been founded by the illegitimate daughter of a Byzantine emperor who came to be known as St Mary of the Mongols – hence the church's official name. She had been sent to Persia to marry the Mongol ruler Hulagu

Khan, but Hulagu had died before she even got there, so she'd married his stepson. When he also died, she returned to Constantinople and withdrew into a life of solitude, turning the church into a nunnery. From then on she was known as Panagia Mouchliotissa, St Mary of the Mongols.

I knew too that the church had great significance for Istanbul's Orthodox community. During the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, hundreds of women and children took refuge within its walls, only to be slaughtered there by Ottoman soldiers. Sultan Mehmet II was so incensed by his own men having done this that he issued an edict declaring that thenceforth St Mary of the Mongols must remain a Christian church for eternity and should never be converted into a mosque. It was the only Byzantine church to be so designated. The name 'Bloody Church' refers to that massacre, and Mehmet's edict still hangs on its wall.

But these were basic facts that any Christian interested in spiritual matters would know. Petro could have gleaned as much from an encyclopaedia. He must have been expecting more from me. I hurriedly tried to remember something more original, but my mind had gone blank.

The pendulum clock behind the altar struck seven. All at once I felt dizzy, from the heat or the incense. I stepped away from Petro and sank into one of the dusty wooden pews lining the side walls. There must have been clocks in other corners of the church that we couldn't see, for the chiming in my brain wouldn't stop. They reminded me of my grandma Safinaz's beloved clocks, which had behaved just like this, striking the hour all together in chorus. I undid my hairclip and released my uncontrollable hair; it fell across my face, hiding me behind a curly black curtain.

Petro made his way over quietly and sat down beside

me. Rather than telling him about the church, should I tell him about the clocks in my grandma's house? Should I say, 'Petro, there were clocks everywhere in her house. I'm not exaggerating. On every floor of that stone house – in the living room, the hall, the kitchen, the pantry. There was even one hanging on the wall of the forgotten back garden, in the shade of some dried-up old fig trees. And, would you believe it, every single one of them – even the one in the backyard – worked perfectly, striking the top of the hour with only a few seconds' difference, if that, and causing all three storeys of the house to shake.'

Don't be ridiculous, Melike! Why would the man care about the clocks in your crazy grandma's house? Focus. Concentrate on the church. There's an important mosaic on the eastern side. Point that out now. Be professional. There's another mosaic depicting Mary of the Mongols asking Jesus for mercy in the name of humanity. That's not here. Where is it? Think, Melike, think. You're here in the city to do a job, don't forget that.

I sat up straight, tossed my hair behind me. I felt Petro's eyes on me, a sensation that gave me both pleasure and discomfort. Why did it feel as if I'd known this man for a long time? Did he look familiar? The closeness I'd felt when, instead of shaking my hand, he'd pulled me to him and hugged me, and I'd rested my head on his vast chest, was a different feeling from the excitement I got when embracing a strange man for the first time.

Mary of the Mongols was looking at us from within a gold-plated frame on the opposite wall. Keeping my eyes fixed on her mournful gaze, I spoke.

'Rumour has it that there were passageways under this church that opened out into tunnels. When I say tunnels, I

mean labyrinths that went all the way to Hagia Sofia, and even beyond, to the sea. Should Istanbul have been blockaded, people could have escaped from here.'

Petro turned towards me, his eyes lingering shamelessly on my face. His stare made me uneasy. 'How do you know that?'

Quite so. Where had all that come from? With so much factual detail about the church to explain, why had I begun my tour-guide duties with a rumour? And why were we whispering? There was no one in the church except us. Or was there? What about the tricycle I'd seen in the garden, the mossy well lid and the dirty washing line? And Pavli the caretaker, popping into my head suddenly after so many years. Where had all these memories – the clocks, Safinaz – come from? They were like ghosts risen from the dead.

I leant my head against the wall behind me and murmured, 'I came to this church a very long time ago. The caretaker told me then.'

Petro nodded. He didn't ask any more questions. I closed my eyes. We sat there silently on the wooden pew in the cool of the church for a long time, like monks deep in meditation.

2

Red Square

It was dusk on a snowy, gloomy March day. Safinaz and I had walked into the Bloody Church hand in hand. I was eight years old.

We lit a candle each and then Safinaz sat down in one of the back rows and closed her eyes. As I wandered off among the icons, Pavli told me about the tunnels that began in the crypt and extended all the way to the sea. He whispered in my ear that my grandmother was a woman with magical powers.

As it turned out, that would be the last evening I'd spend with my grandma. But I didn't know that then.

Except maybe for the snow, that Saturday was just an ordinary Saturday. We'd got home from school at noon and my mother, my brother Cem, my father and I had eaten lunch in the brightly lit kitchen of our apartment in Galata. Then Mum took Cem to her parents' apartment in Harbiye and Dad and I set off on foot for Safinaz's house, where I would stay the night. This had been the Saturday routine for

as long as I could remember. School until midday, then the boy to the maternal grandmother and the girl to the paternal grandmother for the night, leaving Mum and Dad to go out to bars and restaurants with their childless friends.

It was really cold. With my icy fingers in Dad's palm and clouds of steam coming out of our mouths, we walked along our neatly cobbled street to the little square with the famous Galata Tower, and from there down to the shore on the marble steps that were squished between some old buildings. When we climbed into one of the rowing boats that glided calmly back and forth across the steely waters of the Golden Horn, I slid my gloveless hands into the pocket of Dad's overcoat.

The opposite shore, where the elderly, grey-eyed boatman was taking us, always seemed to me like another world, a magical country where foreign languages echoed on the streets. As soon as we landed, I felt as if I was in a different time, as if I had stepped through a gauze curtain. Dad's hand, reaching out for mine, was playful, and there was a smile on his face that even his moustache couldn't mask. He was always like this on Saturdays when we went to visit his mother.

Hand in hand, we walked to the marketplace. As we passed the coffeehouse, the uncles playing backgammon knocked on the steamed-up window – tik, tik.

'Hey, Orhan, where've you been, boy?'

'Leave the *koritsaki* and come and play a game of *tavli*.'

I knew those old men. Whenever Safinaz and I went down to the market together, they would tip their hats to her in silent greeting. My grandma had been an art teacher at the school at the top of the hill. She taught in both the girls' and the boys' schools and was highly respected in the neighbourhood. Some of the old men would come out of the

coffeehouse to chat with her when she passed. With their hats in their hands, they'd stand there, full of troubles. They'd look at me with sad faces and sigh.

When they said '*koritsaki*' – 'little girl' in Greek – they meant me. They were always happy to see Dad though. That day, the pastry-baker Uncle Ilias came to the door with a tray in his hand and tried to invite us inside.

'Ooh, Orhan, my boy. Welcome! You have brought joy. Little lady, you want biscotto? If your *baba sou* permits, there is lemonade. But it's cold. There is cake just out of the oven – let me bring you a plateful.'

Dad was in a hurry that day. He muttered something to Uncle Ilias and pushed me on towards the steep flight of steps. The old women sitting out in front of their houses in spite of the cold mumbled some things from their toothless mouths that I couldn't understand. The dresses hanging on washing lines strung between the narrow, bay-windowed houses were all old, all black. I wanted to ask Dad why, but he was walking so fast, I got all out of breath on the steps, trying to keep up with his long strides. The cold air was stinging my cheeks like a whip and the smell of burning coal caught in my throat. Suddenly I realized why he was rushing. He wanted to hurry up and hand me over to his mother so he could get back to Galata as soon as possible. My heart tightened. Why wouldn't he stay with us? I knew he wasn't going out with my mother that night – I'd heard them say so.

As soon as I saw her – my grandma with magical powers – at the top of the hill, I forgot all of my worries. Safinaz was waiting for us beside the school wall, wearing her grey coat with the fur collar. She was wearing her old-fashioned hat, the one that was soft like a swimming cap and the colour of milk chocolate, with flowers embroidered on the sides. She

was like a statue from another era – tall and slender, with pure white skin. Safinaz Kutsi, this enchanting grandmother of mine.

Dad was annoyed. I could tell from the way he was breathing. White steam came out of his mouth as he spoke.

'You shouldn't have come out in this weather, Mother. You'll catch cold. How long have you been waiting for us?'

Safinaz didn't answer. She never talked unnecessarily.

Dad leant down, kissed my cheeks and whispered, 'Your grandmother is in your care now, Melike, my angel. Keep an eye on her and don't let her do anything silly.'

Black clouds descended over the rooftops. All of a sudden it had become really dark.

'Mother, the child's cheeks are ice cold. Go straight home. Come on, let me kiss you too. I'm worried about you, all alone in that house with nothing but a woodstove. Have you thought any more about moving to an apartment? They're building some in Gayrettepe – modern, brand-new, with central heating. Madam Piraye's friends from high school have all bought flats there. You could live above each other, all together.'

Safinaz raised her thin eyebrows but said nothing. Knowing how stubborn she was, Dad laughed, his teeth strikingly white under his black moustache. I laughed too, then ran and hid my hands in Safinaz's black leather gloves so that Dad wouldn't realize how cold I was. They were so soft.

From the top of the hill, the city below us was disappearing behind a veil of mist. Soon, our hill would be all that remained of the world, and we would be stuck like the animals on Noah's Ark atop Mount Ararat in that little square. When I say 'square', I mean the little area made up of the Greek High School for Girls, the glass frontage of an abandoned

building, and the Bloody Church. I called it the Red Square. Right behind the church, the Greek Orthodox College for Boys rose like a chateau. That was red too.

Red Square belonged to another era. It wasn't just Safinaz's house, beating like a pulse with the ticking of all those clocks; her whole neighbourhood was magical.

I turned and looked at the stone steps that ran all the way down the side of the girls' school. The steps were disappearing from the earth, one by one. In fear, I shouted, 'Daddy, don't go!'

'I have to go, my beautiful daughter. You go on into the house with your grandmother. Off you go! Light the stove, roast some chestnuts, play with Mavri.'

He stood at the top of the stairs, shoved his hands into the pockets of his navy blue corduroy overcoat, and prepared to head down them. My eyes filled with tears. Safinaz would never roast chestnuts! And Mavri was a bad-tempered cat who never left the windowsill by the sewing basket. If Dad went down those steps, the mist would eat him up. I stamped my foot on the ground, even though I knew my father didn't like me doing that. He frowned.

'Mother, come on, please. Look, can't you see what's happening?'

I tried to swallow my tears. My nose was running. My voice was shaking. 'What work do you have, Dad? Are you going to play *tavli* in the marketplace?'

'No, Melike, my angel. I have business this evening. And the word for backgammon is *tavla*, not *tavli*.'

'Stay here with us!'

Mum and Dad were not getting together with their friends that evening. I'd heard Mum talking to her mother about it on the phone at midday when we got home from school.

'Orhan will leave Melike with his mum. Cem and I will come to you, Mother, and I'll stay over.'

Since Mum was staying with my brother, why couldn't Dad stay with us?

'What's the matter, Melike, darling? You're always so excited to come to your grandmother's. You even packed your bag all by yourself as soon as you got home from school.'

Dad didn't stoop down, just bent over to look at my face. I swallowed. The teardrops on my eyelashes were cold.

'The child is right, Orhan. Stay with us tonight, son. It's not safe out there.'

I raised my head and studied my grandma with interest. A wrinkle had formed between her thin eyebrows. Her behatted head was perched on her tall frame like a precious vase. Dad was raking his fingers through his curly hair, like he did when he was upset. He had come out without his beret, even though it was he who was always telling us how important it was to cover our heads to avoid catching cold; he said a person's body heat mostly escaped from their ears, which was why all through the winter he sent us off to school in hats with earflaps.

'Don't you start, Mother. The boatmen will have stopped work for the day by now and I'll have to run to make the bus as it is.'

Two snowflakes fell on his head, becoming stars, then melted into his black curls. I forgot my troubles. I withdrew my red hands from Safinaz's gloves, where I'd been hiding them from Dad, and raised them in the air.

'It's snowing! Grandma, Dad, it's snowing! Look!'

They stopped talking and turned to me.

I giggled. 'Will they close the schools on Monday?'

'If it settles, they will.'

'Let it settle, God, please. Let it settle, I beg you, God!'

'Where does this child learn such expressions, sending up prayers to God and all? I don't understand it, when no one mentions religion in our house.'

I immediately stopped talking, took two steps back and leant against the wall of the school.

Safinaz raised her sharp chin. Narrow blue veins were showing beneath the translucent skin of her neck where it protruded from the fur collar of her coat. Snowflakes were sticking to the tufts of short hair escaping from her cap.

'Look at me, Orhan. You need to be careful at the moment, do you hear me?'

'It's okay, Mother. Don't worry.'

'Listen to me. You're mixed up in something. Where is your wife tonight?'

'Mother, we're all freezing here, I swear. If you're not bothered for my sake, at least think about Melike.'

'Melike is a healthy child. A couple of snowflakes won't hurt her. You look at me. What's this business about? Where is Gulbahar tonight?'

I was catching snowflakes with my tongue in front of the school wall so that they would think I wasn't listening to them. The mist had blanked out not only the city but also its sounds. The only noise I could hear was the guk-guk-guk of the red-beaked rooster in the garden of the old pink mansion, where the chickens had taken refuge from the snow in the coop. When Safinaz asked one more time, I couldn't stop myself, and called out from the edge of the wall. 'Mum is staying with Grandmother Piraye and Grandfather tonight at their house in Harbiye. She and Cem are both staying there.'

When Safinaz raised her left eyebrow, my confidence dissolved. Dad looked angry. I was a bad girl. My eyes filled

with tears again. I shouldn't have said anything. I wished I'd gone with Cem to Grandmother Piraye's house. Right now they'd be sitting around the table in that huge, bright apartment, eating crispy roast chicken and rice, and drinking apple cider. And we were here, about to be eaten up by the mist. Should I ask Dad to take me to Harbiye? No, I couldn't. It would break Safinaz's heart. Cem was Grandmother Piraye's grandchild; I was Safinaz's. That's how it had been ever since we were little. Helplessness filled my lungs like smoke. I choked back my sobs with difficulty.

Dad turned around abruptly. 'Goodbye, you two. I'll come and get Melike tomorrow afternoon. If you need anything, call me and I'll bring it over. I didn't have that phone installed in your house for nothing.'

He pivoted round again before we had time to answer, and with his hands in his pockets he hurried down the steps. The mist gobbled him up at the end of the school wall. Dad vanishing like that opened a huge void in my stomach. Safinaz took my hand and we turned and walked to the middle of the little patch of Red Square which the mist had left to us. Snowflakes were hitting my face, getting into my eyes, sticking to my eyelashes. The void in my stomach hurt, so I tried to distract myself with daydreams. If the schools were closed on Monday, maybe Cem and I could come back here again and slide down the steep hill with bits of cardboard under our bottoms.

Everywhere was so empty, so silent, that the crunch of Safinaz's boots as she walked echoed off the walls of the old houses. Even the cats were hiding somewhere, and the birds had gone quiet. The cobblestones under our feet – rough and uneven but still lovely – shone as if polished. When a boy of about my age disappeared from behind his window, I believed

for a moment that nobody was left in the world but Safinaz and me. The world was like my glass globe that snowed when you shook it. A world made up of one little square. And at its centre, the two of us: Safinaz and Melike Kutsi.

Safinaz stopped at the door of the Bloody Church. All by itself, a hidden door opened in the vine-covered wall. Hand in hand, we walked into a universe that smelled of incense.

The void inside me was filled by flickering candle flames.