

DREAMWALKER

A Novel

M. METİN TAŞ

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He read every book he could get his hands on, indiscriminately. Sometimes he'd even finish entire five or six-book series, only to call them 'not worth a dime,' when asked—yet he would have read every single installment.

I wish he could have read this one too, just to call it 'not worth a dime.'

Chapter 1

When I moved into this house, the thought that I would one day bury a corpse in its garden never even crossed my mind.

That was what ran through his head as he hacked at the earth with a rusty hatchet and flung the loose soil aside with a scrap of particle board. Ten minutes in, his arms and shoulders had begun to ache, and by the time the hole reached knee-depth, there wasn't a part of his upper body that didn't scream.

He had no idea how long he'd been digging... Half an hour? An hour? A whole day? He hadn't seen the sun since he'd started, so it was still the same night—at least he knew that much. But could you really dig a grave in a single night with only a hatchet? He wasn't sure. Every time he checked his watch, it seemed to show the same time. It felt as if time itself had ceased to flow. It was a ridiculous thought, but he no longer trusted his own judgement.

He pushed the thoughts away and focused solely on the task at hand. Despite the pain wracking his body, digging this grave felt like a respite from the nightmare, so much so that he almost wished this brutal drudgery would never end.

The garden behind the shanty had a side wall that blocked the neighbor's view. Still, there was the risk of curious eyes, watching from the apartment buildings.. He'd positioned himself behind a pear tree, using its trunk as a shield. Even so, every time he struck the soil, he half-expected red and blue lights to flash behind him. He found himself wishing the police would arrive and pull him out of this.

But no one came. His neighbor didn't poke her head over the wall, and not a single light flickered in the apartments. Even the traffic on the road down the hill seemed to have stopped. He couldn't remember the last time a pair of headlights passed by.

By the time the hole reached half its intended depth, he'd accepted that any hope of escape was pointless. He would finish digging, dump the body, then go inside, take a shower, and wait for whatever came next in the dazed stupor that had passed for sleep over the last few days—or maybe just the last day.

Until she pushes me and forces me to move.

A black cat approached the rug, sniffing. He waved his arms, trying to shoo it away. "No, no! Nothing for you here."

The cat, accustomed to his daily feedings of wet and dry food, took only a step back, unfazed by his movements. He faked a swing with the particle board, and it finally ran off with a meow. For a moment, he wished the cat had made even more noise. Since the animal was already a sore subject with his neighbor, perhaps the old woman would get curious and stick her head out.

If only it weren't three in the morning... or four... or whatever ungodly hour it is.

...

"Now that you're feeding it, I'm telling you, it'll never leave."

Arda had replied in the most respectful tone he could manage, "Well, let her stay then, Aunt Tuygun. What harm would it do?"

The woman leaning out of her window continued as if she'd rehearsed her speech beforehand. "Fine, feed it, it's a good deed and all, but it's going to piss and crap everywhere, it'll stink. You're a single man too... You don't even clean up in front of your house."

Whoa there, Auntie. So that's what this is about ...

"Aunt Tuygun, please. Look, everything is spotless. It does its business in the garden anyway, why would it make a mess here?" When he saw he hadn't convinced her, he added—though he knew the words would sound awkward coming from him—"Besides, it's a blessed animal."

The mocking smile on the woman's face told Arda that his appeal to her piety had been wasted. "By that logic, spiders are even more blessed. Should we feed spiders too? Though God knows what kind of bugs you're breeding in that house of yours."

Two for two, Aunt Tuygun... you're on a roll.

"No, really, Auntie, I swear. A cleaning lady comes every few weeks, you know that. Honestly, the house is clean, and the yard is too I promise."

"Take it inside then. Leaving it to lounge in the doorway like that... hat nonsense."

Arda pressed his fingertips to his chest. "I can't breathe when there's a cat in the house, Aunt Tuygun hat's why."

The woman clicked her tongue once and shook her head. In a low voice, but clearly meant to be heard, she muttered, "Got an excuse for everything, this one," then slammed her window which was barely a meter above the ground, and drew the curtain.

Arda smiled after her. He still couldn't figure out her problem with the cat. Perhaps the old woman was just using the animal as a pretext to criticize his bachelor lifestyle. But ever since moving in, he hadn't had a single guest—except for one night the teachers from the tutoring center had gathered—and had given no one reason to complain.

If it were a dog, I'd assume she thinks it's haram, but...

Still, he considered how he might smooth things over. He'd already helped one of her grandchildren pass a math exam. He started plotting how

to casually ask if she had another grandchild who needed tutoring. Especially since the cat was pregnant; once she gave birth, it could easily turn into an even bigger source of conflict. Assuming, of course, that Aunt Tuygun's problem was really with the cat at all.

...

Unaware of all these arguments she'd caused, the animal waddled away, her heavy belly swaying. But at the far edge of the garden, she turned around and kept staring.

Should I give her something to eat first? then wondered why such a thought had even crossed his mind at a moment like this.

Escape?

But what was there to escape to, really... it wasn't like he had such a great routine anyway. Waking up, feeding the cat, going to the tutoring center, teaching for five or six hours, maybe chatting in the lounge, coming home, reading, watching a show, going to bed.

Boring...

Ordinary...

But simple. Manageable. And compared to this, infinitely preferable... despite all its dullness. Besides, who says life needs to be anything more than that?

Everyone... but what do they know!

Wasn't playing a positive role in his students' lives enough? Then again, sometimes he wasn't sure if he gave those kids anything beyond a few math equations. But at the very least, he valued them enough not to be his real self in front of them.

Teaching is a bit like acting, after all...

He flinched when the edge of the rug wrapping the corpse came loose and hit the ground with a thud. He looked up at the little girl standing on the other side of the pit. "Did you..." he began but trailed off. He knew it wasn't her; she couldn't have... He went back to work.

A few more strikes with the hatchet, and the hole was deep enough. Without climbing out, he reached over and grabbed the rug, pulling one end toward himself. As he reached for the other end, the part hanging over the empty space slipped. Despite Arda's attempt to steady it, the bundle slammed hard against the ground. From the wrapped end, brown curls spilled out.

Arda lunged, bracing his hand behind where the body's head rested. "I'm sorry," he blurted out, immediately realizing how meaningless the words were. He pressed his forehead against the edge of the pit, closed his eyes, and began breathing heavily through his teeth. When his breathing finally steadied, he opened his eyes.

Half of the rug lay inside the pit, the other half rested on the edge. He slowly pulled the end wrapped around the legs down into the hole until the body lay flat. Before climbing out, he lowered his head. A few brown curls and a sliver of forehead were visible. He bent down to tuck them in, but the moment his fingers brushed the hair, his body shuddered. He pulled back.

He climbed out and didn't look into the grave again until he'd shoved the loose dirt back into the hole, completely burying the rug. After dumping all the earth in, he spread the excess dirt around with his hands and the board, leveling the ground as best he could. Finally, he scattered leaves and branches over the top. A few gusts of wind would undo the disguise, but for now, it looked ordinary enough.

He picked up the hatchet and the board. Before turning away, he glanced at the bush where the cat had fled. She was still there, staring. She hadn't moved an inch. But there was something eerie about her stillness—as if frozen mid-stride. Arda didn't dwell on it. "I'll bring you something, you wait there," he muttered, then walked along the side wall of the shanty toward the front door.

He dropped his tools in the entryway and headed for the bathroom. While waiting for the water to heat up, he caught a glimpse of his reflection. He averted his gaze—not from the mud smeared across his face, but from the blood coating his chest and arms. Yet he couldn't help but look back. As

if seeing the stains for the first time, he began stripping in a frenzy. His clothes felt like they were burning his skin. Even though the blood had long since dried, he could swear he still smelled it.

As he struggled to pull the T-shirt over his head, he thought he tasted the rusty tang of blood. He yanked hard at the collar until the fabric tore. He flung the shredded cloth out the bathroom door before throwing himself under the still-cold March water. The shock made his body tense. He fumbled with his pants, slamming against the shower walls as he peeled off the heavily soaked fabric.

Once undressed, he covered his face and let out a strangled scream. Sliding down the tiles, he pulled his knees to his chest. He sat there under the now scalding water for a length of time he couldn't track, unable to bring himself to reach for the tap and turn on the cold.

Let it wash it all away... burn it clean.

He stepped out of the bathroom, his skin flushed red. Wrapping himself in a towel, he stuffed his blood-soaked clothes into a trash bag and tossed it into the second room—the one where the floor was stained with dried blood—and yanked the door shut. He went to his own room and collapsed onto the bed. As he felt his surroundings begin to dissolve into something else, he snapped his head to the side and shouted, “Sima, stop it. Enough! Just leave me alone already!”

The little girl tilted her head, her huge eyes stared back in confusion. A false alarm. Still, when he turned back toward the ceiling, he covered his eyes and whispered,

“Okay. I give in.” As his hands slid to his chin. “Whatever that means...” slipped out, cut short by the vibration of the phone beside the pillow.

Damla's message appeared on the screen: “*Arda, are you okay?*”

She must have been worried after getting no reply to her earlier messages. This time, Arda wanted to write back, but as he hesitated, the screen dimmed and went dark. Since he had no idea what to say, he left the phone untouched.

I'll write later... if there is a later.

He thought about how easily everything could be turned upside down, how yesterday's priorities could be reduced to trivial nonsense in an instant.

If they can become insignificant this quickly, he wondered, were they ever truly important to begin with?

"Of course they were."

He was startled by his own voice, not having expected such a definitive answer. Still, he doubted he was being entirely honest. How many of his old priorities could he really keep at the top of his list after tonight? Probably very few. But there was only one thing he truly cared about, and it was because of that thing that the answer had come so fast. No matter how extraordinary his ordeal or how far his life had veered off course, that one thing would carry over into his new reality without losing any of its importance.

...

"Arda, did you see it too?"

In front of classroom 7-B, with the class register and textbook tucked under one arm, and his other hand on the doorknob, Arda turned to Damla. He looked into her ice-green eyes, which seemed to sparkle whenever she got excited.

"Yeah. I saw it," he said, assuming her breathless state came from running to catch him, though he wanted to believe there was more to it. Smiling, he added:

"Looks like it's finally ending."

"Right? It is, isn't it? She smiled in the lounge just now. It's finally over, thank God. We're going to be friends again."

When Damla smiled with such genuine cheer, Arda felt that familiar sensation he always felt when he saw her laugh. The things they'd left unsaid hovered, once again, at the tip of his tongue. But he held back. Tilting his head, he pursed his lips and made a doubtful sound. "Mmm..."

Damla lightly smacked his shoulder in mock annoyance. “Why do you say it like that?”

“I didn’t say anything, Damla.”

She scrunched up her face, mimicking him, “Hmph.” As she tilted her head, her thick hair barely held by a clip tumbled to one side, exposing the pale curve of her neck above the collar of her teacher’s coat. Arda’s grip on the doorknob tightened. He felt as though, if he let go, his hand would move on its own and reach for her cheek.

Not the time. Not the place.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Damla. I just meant... wait a little, don’t rush it.”

“Ugh, you... always looking at the negative side. Can’t you just say it’ll be okay or something like that? No—you saw it, she smiled. It’s over, the resentment’s gone.”

Arda gestured behind him with his thumb. “Okay, let me get through this class first, we’ll talk afterward.”

Damla rolled her eyes. “You’re such an oaf, Arda. A pure, unfiltered oaf.”

Arda turned to face her, and after a brief pause, did something that left her frozen. He reached out and cupped her cheek. Leaning in, he said, “Everything’s going to be okay, Damla.”

She flushed crimson, rooted to the spot. Arda slowly withdrew his hand. Before opening the door, he took one last look. Damla was smiling, her lips pressed together, her eyes narrowed warmly. He smiled back and stepped inside.

“Ooooh, teacher’s got a secret! Do tell, sir.”

What? Did they see that?

“Tell what, son, what are you talking about?”

“Sir, you’re smiling.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Can’t a man smile?”

Another student chimed in.

“Nah, sir, this is a different kind of smile. We get it. You can’t fool us.”

And they really did get it. He didn't know how, but they did. Sixth graders were still a bit young to notice things like that, though their instincts weren't bad either. By eighth grade and beyond, that intuition seemed to dull a little. But with seventh graders, there was no hiding anything.

Still, he played it cool.

"No, son. Mr. Cenk told a joke in the hall. I was laughing at that." He picked a genuinely funny story from memory and told it, sending the class into laughter. He was about to tell them to take out their books when a kid from the back row muttered:

"Yeah, sure, we *totally* believe you, sir."

That line got more laughs than the joke itself. Even Arda had to turn toward the board to hide his smile.

He found it strange how distant that memory felt. It had all happened just that morning. At least technically. Yet it felt as if a week had passed. Time didn't seem to be flowing the way he was used to. It shouldn't have been possible. But was there anything left that seemed impossible anymore?

He covered his face again. It wasn't just the time. Joking with his students, the quiet pride he felt when they chose him as a confidant, the fact that his biggest worry had been causing the rift between Rumeysa and Damla, the hopeful way he'd told Damla everything would be okay... Tonight had irrevocably left all of that behind. He knew he had to accept it, but he wasn't past denial and anger yet.

Was depression next... or bargaining?

A sudden weight settled over him. If he hadn't been lying in bed, he might have collapsed. As his thoughts grew hazy, he felt as if he were sinking deeper into the mattress. Unlike the semi-comatose state he'd been stuck in all day—or all week, or however long it had been—he realized with relief that he might finally sleep.

He forced his head to the side but couldn't see Sima. As he closed his eyes, his last coherent thought was that he hadn't buried the body deep

enough and that Ilgin wouldn't bear it when it was discovered. Imagining the poor girl's already fragile state crumbling further filled him with a sorrow so intense, it almost prevented him from falling asleep. But the heaviness won, and he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

The very last thing that crossed his mind was, "*Damn it, I forgot to feed Gimli.*"