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WHEN OUR CITIES HOLLOVED

by

HANA AL-HARASTANI  
B.A. University of Michigan-Flint, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Major Professor: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

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## **ABSTRACT**

*When Our Cities Hollowed* is an interrelated collection of short fiction that follows an extended family's everyday lives before and during the Syrian Civil War. In efforts to combat current media narratives regarding Syrians, this collection presents a complex counter-narrative, following characters of a typical Sunni Muslim, middle-class family, some of whom support the government, others of whom support the opposition. War, in these stories, is a looming shadow, often acting as a catalyst to many of the characters' conclusions about love, family, and what it means to be alive.

To the brave men and women fighting oppressive regimes:  
we see you, we hear you, we stand with you.  
Know that the world has not forgotten.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my parents, without whose encouragement and pride, this work would not have been realized. Thank you both for your support and for your funny and insightful anecdotes about your lives.

To those willing to share their stories about Syria with me—my grandparents Nour and Adnan; cousins Hala and Ghaliah; friends Lana, Rand, Dana; and uncles Ahmad, Maher, and Jamal. I appreciated your patience putting up with my amateur Arabic and constant questions. Thank you for sharing despite how painful those memories were to share.

To Khaled Khatib, the White Helmet whom, despite the chaos in Aleppo, took time to answer my questions.

To Cecilia, whose invaluable insights inspired and shaped much of the collection, thank you for your patience and help throughout the process.

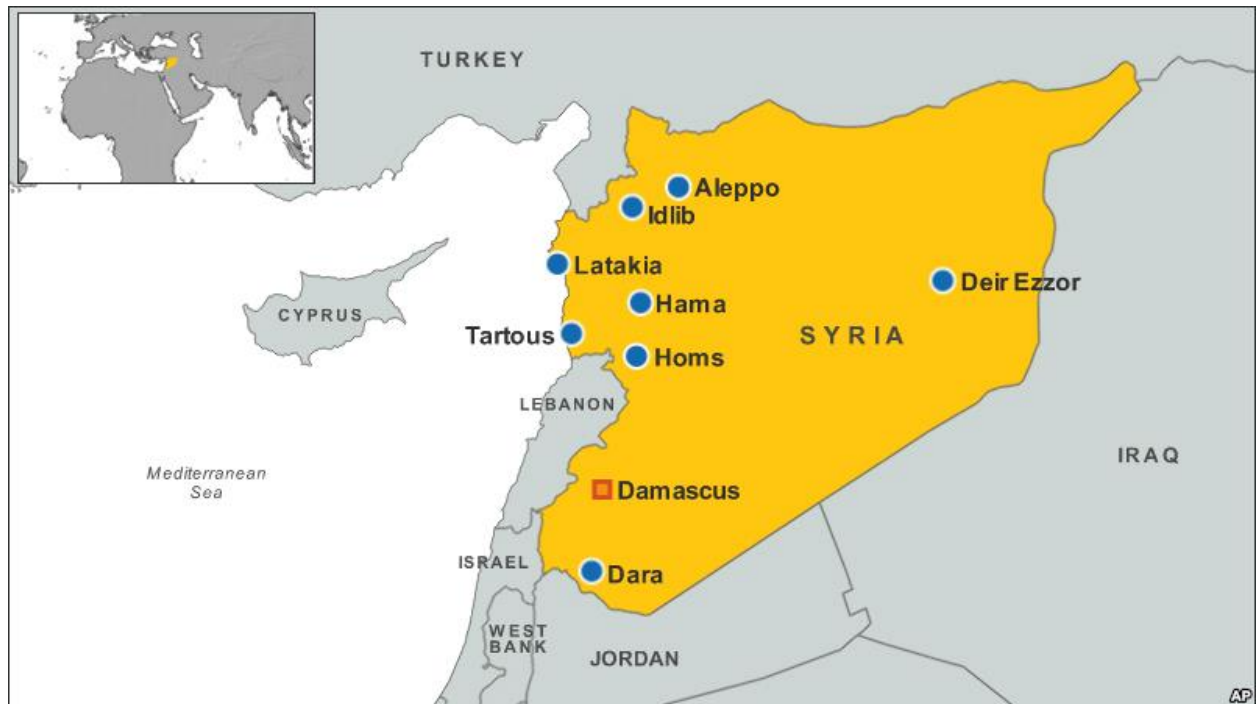
To my cohort and friends, thanks for reading and sharing your excitement and insights on these stories. You push me to tell these stories better.

And last, only because I know He won't mind: thank you for your love even when I didn't deserve it. Your miracles inspire me every day.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

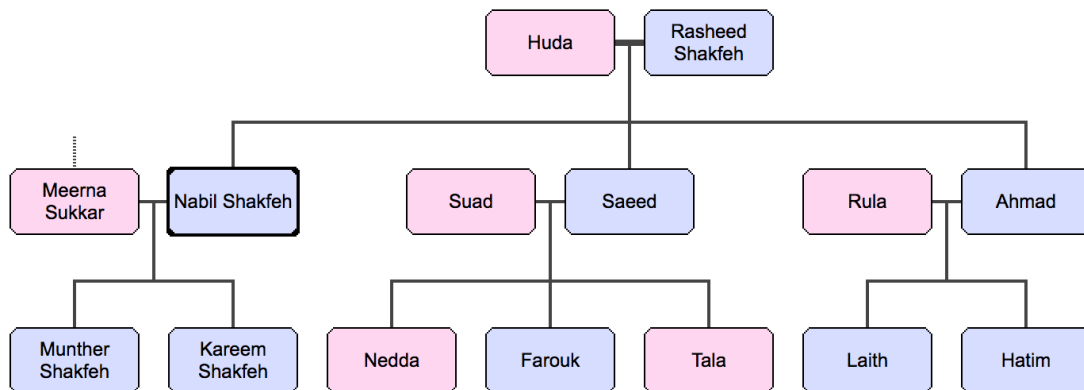
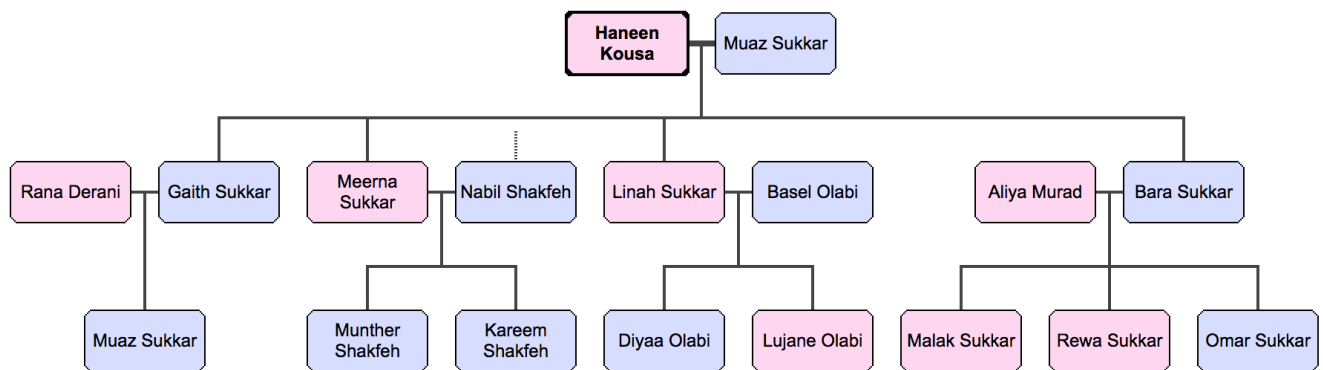
MAP OF SYRIA.....	1
FAMILY TREES .....	2
PROLOGUE: FEBRUARY 1982.....	4
AL-FATIHA AND TEA.....	7
TEITA’S HOUSE.....	10
I MEANT WHAT I SAID WHEN I TOLD YOU I COULD BUY SIX FALAFEL SANDWICHES FOR A HUNDRED LIRAS .....	24
NIGHTINGALE .....	26
FIVE-STEP APRICOT JAM.....	57
THE BATTLE OF ZABADANI .....	76
HELMETS.....	80
NOTHING BUT NAWAR .....	90
FINDING SALAAM .....	105
APPENDIX: READING LIST .....	118

## MAP OF SYRIA





## FAMILY TREES



“I tried to keep my mouth shut, but my tongue  
didn’t have any more room for scars  
in the shape of my teeth.”  
–Amal Kassir

## **PROLOGUE: FEBRUARY 1982**

### **I.**

Before Hama City hollowed, an army jeep rolled into Bara's neighborhood. Ten men in army uniform warned the entire block that anyone who didn't leave the city would be killed with the rebels. Bara had always wanted to salute a man in uniform, but stony expressions and hands poised on weapons snuffed any such notion.

Mama called Baba while Bara told his sisters. As Bara stuffed his Atari into a bag along with his Hot Wheels, his sister Meerna stormed in, took one look at it, and dumped them out. "Take your clothes, ya ahbal!" She tore through his closet and threw in clothes to replace the games.

When Meerna got like this, he and his sisters would shout, "here comes the Meerna storm, everyone hide!" No one said it this time.

"Where are we going?" Bara whispered. "Where are we going?"

No one answered because nobody knew.

An hour later, the seven of them were packed into a five-seater. A small, white, open-trunked Suzuki trailed with their belongings. Bara sat on Gaith's lap, Linah on Dana's. The roads leading out of the city backed up for miles behind them.

"Homs is a beautiful city," Baba said.

Behind them, tanks edged onto the road, blocking the paths in and out of Hama.

### **II.**

Before Hama hollowed, a young girl hugged a shawl around her shoulders and watched the old Roman waterwheel turn from the balcony. A tank and several trucks filed into her street and obstructed her view. Armed soldiers poured into apartments. Her mother pulled her inside.

Boots thundered up the steps just as they hid in the kitchen attic. It didn't matter. A soldier found them and shot the child in the head. He turned. Smiled at the screaming mother.

"You wanted freedom? Now you're free." He took aim and fired.

The child's teenage sister had heard the gunshots and hid in a wardrobe behind her mother's long overcoats. Quiet sobs she could not contain lured another soldier to the bedroom. He fished her out with one arm, held a knife in the other.

With an arm around the struggling girl, he pulled her into the dining room where her mother and baby sister lay on the table. Blood dripped in a constant stream off the table. A young man, hair spiked upward, sat with the corded telephone pressed against his ear, eyeing the blood as if it were an inconvenience.

"Don't kill him," he said as easily as one would say *don't eat yet*. "Ship him off...I don't care where. Get visas processing in the farthest countries from here...Listen to me, he's my brother. You'll do as I say." He let out a sigh. "Thank you—no, I don't want to see him. I never want to see him again." The phone clicked and he acknowledged the girl who wept in the other man's arms. "Lieutenant Saeed, what should I do with her?"

The Lieutenant observed the young woman. "What's your name?" When the girl did not respond, he said, "I'm going to call you Suad. You're going to bring happiness to my life."

The soldier pulled her into the street. Next to the Orontes coursed a crimson river. The soldier dragged the girl over mounds of bodies, stepped on noses and ankles, and splashed in blood. She covered her ears as the jeep rolled over and crushed the bones of her neighbors.

### III.

After Hama hollowed, Syria curled into a fetal position around its wound. The government cauterized the bleed, buried bodies, and wound sheets of paper messily around it. *Uprising. Rebels. Collateral damage.* Newspaper ink bled for days then stopped altogether, leaving a raw, ugly scar. Years later, deep beneath the surface of that scar, healthy tissue became infected. But deep infections, like regimes, can be treated.

## **AL-FATIHA AND TEA**

Before the crickets halted their nightly symphonies, and the pigeons cooed their offspring awake, Haneen Kousa prepared to converse with God. She ran cool water through her fingers, swished some in her mouth, and washed her face, arms, her silky black-dyed hair, ears, and finally her feet. The old wooden door squeaked as she leaned against it to bring her foot over the sink. Sixty-four years and the motion was still not difficult for her, an act she performed with pride. “Umme Gaith,” her friends would say, “God will understand if you bring the water to your feet.” She would smile and say, “Yes, but God is still giving me the strength to bring my foot up. Why would I show Him anything but gratitude?”

She left the bathroom and went down the hallway to the drawing room at the front of the house. White, wooden chairs and a couch with pink vintage upholstery hugged one side of the room. The large, beige, marble table in the center showcased crystalline sculptures. A crystal vase with crystal flowers stood at the center, surrounded by candy-shaped crystals in double-twisted wrappers, the Ka’bah, Burj Al Arab, and a digital 3-D print of Muaz, her eldest grandchild, and hands holding up a globe that can spin on its base. The other side of the room had a large, glass dinner table adorned with a bejeweled, sequined table cover. The china cabinet lining the wall displayed both several sets of porcelain coffee cups and hexagonal, wooden mosaic boxes. One box contained over seventy different teas and herbal blends.

Haneen brought out her prayer rug and clothes from the cabinet beneath the china and, putting on the prayer clothes, faced the rug towards Makkah. At that moment, her husband walked out of the bedroom, rubbing his eyes. “Umme Gaith,” he mumbled, “If you’re not going to use the chair, at least keep it behind you in case you need it in the middle of prayer.”

“I don’t need it, Abu Gaith,” she said.

He slid one of the vintage chairs behind the prayer rug. “To reassure me.”

Haneen waited for him to leave for the bathroom to smile. She sucked in a deep breath and stood on the carpet. She lifted her hands to her ears, whispered “Allahu Akbar,” folded her arms across her chest and began to recite Al-Fatiha. As the words bubbled from her mouth like a gentle spring, the world fell away. Even the melodious pre-athan duaa that came from the minaret was background noise.

When she completed the prayer, she sat cross-legged on the carpet, tucked a strand of hair creeping out of the headpiece behind her ear and lifted her hands to the heavens. She supplicated to Him, asking to protect her family from the evils of the world’s demons, both human and jinn. She prayed for her granddaughter Lujane, who wanted nothing more than to get married. She prayed for Bara, who wouldn’t stop smoking, ya Allah, his wife was becoming more impatient with him and she wants to leave. Ya Allah let her be more patient. She prayed for her daughter Meerna, living with Nabil in Amreeka in Chikagho with her two kids, Munther and Kareem, who were becoming handsome young men. Ya Allah keep them away from corruption and keep their hearts pure. Ya Allah, creator of worlds, the heavens and the earth, answer my prayers. Protect my family. Protect their families. Keep them safe. Ameen.

The Fajr athan sounded through the streets, echoing off residential complexes and shops beneath. Haneen rose to her feet, her back and joints crackling as she straightened. Abu Gaith entered, and the two of them prayed Fajr together. Abu Gaith used the chair instead of prostrating with his hands and face kissing the floor. Haneen bent low, felt every joint and tendon strain, felt her lower back flare, pressure on her neck. “Subhana rabbi al aa’la,” she whispered. Glory be to my Lord, the Most High.

When the prayer concluded, Haneen boiled a kettle on the stove. She went back to the china to bring down the mosaic box of teas. As she reached for it, pain rippled up her back and she crumpled to the floor. Abu Gaith heard the fall and came running. He helped her to a chair.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “Just a little pain.”

He said he believed her, but in a few hours time, the whole family crowded around, making sure she was comfortable, that she was entertained, that her teacup never emptied. Older grandchildren yelled at younger grandchildren to leave the candy-shaped glass alone and to step away from the delicate crystals. Daughters made two rounds of coffee and kept Haneen company. Sons went to the kiosk a block down the street to get ice cream and treats for their nieces and nephews, smoking half a pack of cigarettes on the way.

Soon, kids ran around with vanilla moustaches and sticky fingers, older kids played Uno, daughters fell into gossip, and sons returned to work. Haneen traced the rim of her cup, half filled with another herbal blend. She leaned back and smiled when she knew they weren’t looking.



*Homs, 2010*

## TEITA'S HOUSE

I'm stretched out under the massive air conditioner at my grandmother's house, watching season ten of *Friends*. It's the first time it airs in Syria. According to my cousins in America, the show already ended in the West, maybe two years ago, but I guess it takes a while for them to put the Arabic subtitles on the bottom of the screen. I don't need them.

My mom walks in, dressed in her bright blue hijab and long, navy blue overcoat. She's a tall woman, taller than my father, even with the slight hunch in her back. When she looks at me, she reacts as if I grabbed a knife from the opposite end. "Lujane, don't sit under the air conditioner. You'll get a cold."

"I'm fine, Mama. I only have the fan on. Where are you going?"

"And what are you watching?" she continues as if she hasn't heard me. "Another show? These Amreeki shows are making the acne on your back worse. You want to still have them on your wedding too?"

I absently rubbed the back of my arm. The irritated red skin with white bumps like welts has been a topic of interest for the past few weeks. "Why are you talking about weddings? I'm not even seeing anyone yet."

"I got a call from someone, and they want to meet you. I told you, you have to take care of yourself so you're ready when—"

"Who?" I shouldn't have sat up that quickly, and regret it the minute her eyebrows stretch up in a little arch. Could you blame me? I'm twenty-four, I haven't had a "call" in at least a year, and we've had family calling up with concerns—as if I was the problem.

Mama takes a seat across from me, a smile on her face. I threw my head back on the couch. The leather coughed as my damp skin slid against it. “His name is Kenan Teejari. He’s twenty-eight. From what his mother tells me, he and his dad are merchants.”

“Oh...” On the screen, Chandler is pouting; Rachel looks like she won a million bucks. I know if I react, I’ll feed into Mama’s excitement and she’ll never stop talking about it. “Did you make an appointment?”

“Yes, they live right there—” Mama pointed to their apartment, which I could see from the window adjacent to the couch. “They’ll be walking over here at around seven tonight.”

I made a face. “Here? Tonight?”

“Yes.”

I stare at the ceiling and notice one of the light bulbs is burnt out. “Fine. I’ll need to go home and change first. Where are you going? I’ll come with you.”

Mama shakes her head. “I’ll get your clothes. I’m taking Teita to the chiropractor and you need to babysit. Khalo Bara is bringing his daughters here before he goes back to work in the afternoon.”

My uncle Bara has three great kids. Malak is an adult in a six-year-old’s body, completely opposite her little sister Rewa, a four-year-old who thinks she’s a kangaroo. Omar’s a baby, and a noisy one at that. Thankfully he wouldn’t be joining us. Taking care of the girls was handful enough, and it is the last thing I want to do before sitting down with a potential life partner.

Mama probably sees the annoyance wrinkling my forehead. “Don’t worry. We’ll be home before tonight with your clothes, too. You’ll have plenty of time to get ready.”

I rub my face, feeling defeated. “Okay. Just...don’t get the green skirt. I want to wear the black one. With the pink shirt. White hijab. And don’t forget my makeup.”

She looks like she’s about to say something, probably about how the green brings out my eyes, and that black is not a youthful color, but instead she stands up and says, “Okay. Don’t let the kids go out to the balcony. And make sure they eat something.”

I turn to the television. Rachel punchlines something to Chandler. I miss the joke.

#

The doorbell rings. Teita’s doorbell sounds like chirping birds. If you hold it down, the first chirp won’t stop until you let go. It’s fun to guess who’s at the door by the orchestration of the chirps. In this case it was a couple short tweets. Then a long one. Then yelling on the other side of the door. Khalo Bara and company has arrived.

Once Khalo Bara leaves, Rewa considers me for a long time. Then, deciding I pose no threat to her shenanigans, she shoots me a toothy grin, grabs the edge of her shirt, and folds it up to make a pouch. She hops away, giggling. Malak is sitting beside me with her legs crossed, manicured hands poised in her lap. She’s wearing a mini dress and pink plastic slippers, her hair in a French braid. She casually takes my hand and observes it.

“You have long nails,” she says. “Nail polish would look nice on them.”

I pull my hand away and take a look for myself. “You’re right.”

“Why don’t you? Don’t you want to be pretty?”

Her question surprises me, even though it’s coming out of a little girl’s mouth. “Yeah, but I also have to pray. I can’t have nail polish on.”

“Because then when you make wu’du and wash your hands and face and feet the water won’t wash your nails? Then you can’t pray?” Malak asks.

I smile. “Exactly.”

She looks down at her own nails, curling her fingers. “Mama says I don’t have to pray yet.”

“She’s right. You’re still young.”

At that moment, Rewa hops out of the living room. I chase after her. For a moment, I imagine I’m around her age. My only fear today would be losing a game of tag.

#

The doorbell rings. It’s hasty. I’m in prostration in the middle of Asr prayer. I hear Malak’s shoes clicking against the stone floor, and the door creaking shortly after. A boy is selling roses. Take one. Only five liras. Malak apologizes. The boy insists and she closes the door. I focus again on my prayer. Lord, give me patience and strength to get through this day. Ameen.

#

The doorbell rings. It’s long enough to be friendly, short enough to not be childish. It’s a neighbor from the seventh floor. She’s a friend of Teita’s. She likes to be called Tahnt Nabila, which is different than the familiar title of Khaleh, which means Auntie. Tahnt is closer to madam. She liked to sound, sophisticated, I guess.

Tahnt Nabila greets me by taking my hand and kissing the air once near each of my cheeks. “Is your grandmother home?” she asks after idle small talk.

“No. She’s out with my mom. ”

“Tell her I’ll be stopping by late tonight or tomorrow. My son’s back from England, and I have pictures of his fiancée. She’s so beautiful. Blonde! With blue eyes! And her nose is a little button.”

“Sure...” I absently rub my nose. I don’t know what to say and it doesn’t matter because she’s already on the elevator going back up to her high-end life with her Western daughter-in-law. I wonder if she’s prettier than Jennifer Aniston. I wish I were blonde. Once I asked Mama if I could dye my hair and she said I could do whatever I wanted to my hair once it turned grey. When I get married, I’m going to dye it blonde, and there’s nothing she can do about it.

#

The doorbell rings. The landlady says my rent is due. I tell her it’s not my house. Come back later. No, come back tomorrow.

#

The doorbell rings. Whoever’s at the door is not letting go of the button.

Leaving Malak and Rewa in the kitchen at the end of the hall, I walk past the bathroom on my right, the living room on my left, and put my hand on the doorknob. I press my eye against the peephole and it’s completely black. “Who is it?” I call.

The chirping comes to an end for two merciful seconds, and then person on the other side answers with another obnoxious chirp, long and unrelenting.

I throw on a jacket and scarf and open the door. There are only two people I know who do that at Teita’s house: my cousins, Dalia, who’s currently studying in Beirut, and Muaz. As predicted, Muaz pushes the door open wider and strolls past me.

“Hi, Lujane.”

“Hey, Muaz.”

He might as well model for Lacoste with his signature black V-neck, dark jeans, and black shoes. We shake hands and air kiss once on each cheek. He reeks of cologne and

cigarettes. As he walks into the kitchen, Malak scrutinizes him over her olive and cheese sandwich. Rewa stops eating and hops towards him with her mouth full. “Hi, ‘gas!’”

“Hi, Stinky Butt,” he replies, picking her up. Rewa clings tight to the edge of her shirt, keeping her pouch in place.

“I’m not a stinky butt, I’m a kangaroo!” She shakes her toy-filled pouch proudly.

“Kangaroos have stinky butts, don’t they?” Muaz says.

“No,” she says with a grin.

I smile, too. “What are you doing here, Muaz?”

He sets Rewa down. “I have a meeting on this side of town. Thought I’d come say hi to Teita. She’s not here, is she?” He walks deeper into the kitchen, fills the teakettle with water, and places it on the stove.

“Nope. Missed her by a few.”

“I’ll wait. Want some tea?”

“Yeah, sure.” I want to tell him that he needs to leave but I hesitate. I don’t have anything against Muaz, but I don’t want him around when the suitor shows up, partly because he doesn’t have the best inside voice. “Well, she’ll be busy the rest of the day. There are guests coming over in a couple hours.”

“Who’s coming?”

Pretending to be distracted with the girls’ bickering, I juggle my options and wonder if lying is a good idea. Maybe he’ll respect my request for privacy if I tell him. So, I explain what my mom told me that morning.

“Really? Why would a suitor...?” He raises his eyebrows and looks at me. “For you?” For some reason, he laughs, and it unsettles me.

“Yeah. My mom thought it would be more convenient so...”

“Yeah, okay. You want your grandma to meet him too? That’s weird.”

“No it’s not. I want her opinion.” I don’t want to complicate the situation. He doesn’t need to know the details. He just needs to leave.

Muaz doesn’t reply, which shouldn’t have annoyed me. I fix another sandwich for Malak and clean up after Rewa. A few minutes later, he hands me my cup of tea.

“Careful, it’s hot.”

“I know.”

“I’m just looking out for you.” He smiles, but it doesn’t touch his eyes. “Wouldn’t want it burning your nose. Doesn’t it dive in first when you drink? How do you stop that from happening with a nose like yours?”

Haqeer is a word in Arabic that’s difficult to translate into English. It means someone who is cruel and despicable, to the extent that he has become worthless. It’s a word that would have been immediately snapped back had there not been two pairs of curious eyes staring up at us. I try to think of something else to say. Nothing comes to mind. Instead, my eyes start to sting. Heat rises to my face. Malak looks concerned. I want to leave. Instead, I say, “Get out.”

“What’s wrong? Wait, are you going to cry?”

Instead of splashing tea on his chest like every muscle in my body is ready to do, I set the cup down and shove him, not the way he came in, but deeper into the kitchen towards the balcony. He’s laughing all the way through, letting me push him out. “Just get out of my face.” I swing the door open, shove, and shut the door behind him. He’s lucky there are two doors to get out of the scorching Damascus heat. I lock the door without a second thought. I watch Muaz

casually reaching into his back pocket for cigarettes, then the way he leans over with his hand against the rails like a movie actor. I hate him. I hate everything about him.

I take a breath and blink back tears. Malak asks me for more juice, and I shuffle to the other side of the kitchen to get it from the fridge. I pause to look at the magnets hanging on the refrigerator door: a swan, chipped porcelain fruit bundles, a knockoff Winnie the Pooh, and some verse from the Quran. My gaze falls on the cheap mirror hanging crookedly off to the side. In it, my eyes look disturbingly huge and are red and puffy; my hooked nose is extra long and bright pink. The mirror has a distortion. The middle part of it elongates my face while the outer parts stretch it out. I know this, and yet, I wonder how much of a difference it makes. I don't have a button nose or light colored hair. Who would be attracted to this?

#

The doorbell rings. It's soft. Polite. Malak looks up from her coloring book. Rewa is too occupied to care; she's fiddling with bobby pins and other hair accessories, trying to make her pouch stay put without needing to hold it. We're all sitting on the floor in Teita's bedroom. I have the phone pressed against my ear, my hijab pooling around my neck in Muaz's absence. Mama is not answering, and I am about to try Teita's. It's almost seven. I don't expect the suitor to come on time. Everyone knows it's rude, just in case we're not ready. And yet, the doorbell rings. I expect Muaz to open the door. I haven't seen him for a couple hours. I assume he helped himself out through the sunroom door on the other side of the house and is now sitting in the living room, watching TV. Or maybe he saw himself out.

When the bell rings once more, Malak stands up. "Should I get it?"

"Yeah. If it's Tahnt Nabila, tell her Teita's going to be here in a few hours."

"Okay." She smiles, and I hear her little shoes click against the marble.



“Rewa,” I say. “Can you stay here for me? Keep fixing your pouch, I’ll be right back.”

I make my way down the hall, fixing my hijab as I pass the front door before Malak could open it and poke my head into the living room to yell at Muaz. As I approach, I say, “I’m babysitting two kids and you can’t get up to open the door?” Only, there’s no one there. I check the bathroom and kitchen. His phone is next to the stove. I look into balcony and blanch. Muaz is huddled on the floor against the wall, face buried in his arm. I unlock the door and throw it open. He looks up and glares at me, then tries to stand. He stumbles, and I catch him, sending us both stumbling inside. He’s drenched in sweat, face ripe as a tomato. He shoves me away and trips deeper into the cool kitchen. He immediately goes for a glass of water.

“What happened?” I say. I’m grateful for the concern in my voice.

He downs a glass of water and fills another. “Locked me out. Why would you lock me out, haqeera?” His voice has risen to a shout.

“I didn’t,” I shout back. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I thought the sunroom door was unlocked.”

“It wasn’t.” He wipes his brow. “Where the hell were you? Didn’t you hear me pounding on the doors?”

I shake my head. Muaz drinks a few more glasses then looks at me as if to yell some more, but his eyes drift down to stare at something behind me, and he storms into the bathroom. I turn to see Malak, half-hidden behind me.

“There’s someone at the door,” she says.

I poke my head out of the kitchen. The front door is partway open and Rewa is hopping towards it. Taking a deep breath, I open it a crack wider. A woman stands there with a younger man. I don’t see him clearly because I’m already hiding behind the door.

“I’m sorry,” the woman says, “I don’t know if I have the right house. Is this Umme Gaith’s?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.” I glance down at my clothes: jeans, a green shirt, and pink mesh slippers. My hair is probably a mess, too. “We’re...we’re not ready yet. I’m sorry. Come in. Just give us a few minutes.” I wave Malak over and tell her to seat the man and his mother in the great room. I nudge Rewa into the living room, sprint past the great room, and slip into Teita’s bedroom, closing the door. I call Teita. The phone almost slips from my hand. We’re on our way, she says. Just relax, she says.

I want to stay in this room. It’d be easier not to face this family who are probably judging me right now. Judging my mother. My family. It’s not normal for a girl to open the door for her suitors. She should be tucked away in the house somewhere and walk out like royalty a few minutes after everyone has settled in. Everyone is supposed to stand and greet her, too, but I screwed that up. Now that I have to sit with them and wait for Mama and Teita, and I guess they’re going to get the royal greeting.

I’m better off not coming out until Mama returns. Then again, I have a four-year-old doing God-knows-what in the other room. So instead of waiting around for them to come, I head to Teita’s wardrobe.

The pastel green finish on the white wood is probably older than Mama. I take the little gold key Teita hides in her bedside drawer and unlock the dresser. Her clothes are at least five sizes larger than mine. Sifting through the wardrobe, I find blouses, blazers, skirts, jewelry, belts, lacy lingerie. I don’t know why the last bit surprises me. Not wanting to waste any more time, I yank a long-sleeved floral blouse off the hanger. I rummage through her box of belts and find a gold-plated one. It’s wide on me, but I manage to stick in a few safety pins to keep it in place.

Last, I raid her hijab drawer and pull out a simple white scarf. I wrap it in a way that covers the blouse's wide neckline.

I'm going in to see a potential soul mate without any makeup on, in my grandmother's clothes, wearing pink mesh slippers. I can't help but think what a great *Friends* episode this would make. Only there will be no happy ending for me.

"So sorry about that," I say as I enter the room. Kenan and his mother both stand to greet me. I smile. She shakes my hand and gives me a kiss on each cheek. I regret not spritzing any perfume. I turn my attention to Kenan. It's the first time I really look at him. He looks like a scrawny Vin Diesel with a well-groomed, short beard and kind eyes. We exchange a polite hello without shaking hands, and I take a seat across from them. The great room with its white wood and vintage pink upholstery has two couches, and several chairs arranged in a U-shape. They're sitting on the couch that makes the line of the U, and so I sit on a chair in the curve. "This is weird, I know. My mother will be here soon." They smile back. His mother asks me a few cordial questions and carries light conversation. Kenan looks between us, nodding occasionally. I hear Rewa's voice in the other room followed by Muaz's. Knowing that she's being looked after reassures me.

#

The doorbell doesn't ring. The door opens and in comes Teita and my mother, carrying several bags each. I excuse myself from the room. It has only been twenty minutes, and yet it feels like an hour has gone by. Kenan had asked me standard, general questions: Where do I imagine myself in five years? Do I want to work? How many kids do I want? His mother tries to trace my family tree to see if we were related in any way. It would be wonderful, she says.

I want to tell Mama that she's late, that I am a hideous mess and it's all her fault, but the look on her face tells me she's already apologetic. Taking some bags from her, I whisper, "How do I look?"

She gives me a quick once-over and frowns. Then shrugs. "You look decent. Do you want to change? I brought your things." I nod and she hands me another bag. My mother and I pass the guests on the way in, and she stops, greeting them warmly. I continue deeper into the apartment to the bedroom.

When I return, the environment has become one of laughter and camaraderie. I greet them again in clothes that fit and take a seat next to my mother. Kenan and I exchange glances. Before I could get a word out, Rewa hops into the room. Malak is chasing after her, but she stops, blushing as she sees us. She hides behind the door. Rewa looks at the party, and then hops to Kenan's mother.

"Do you have any candy?" she says.

I feel the blood rushing to my face. They must think we're crazy. My crazy family. Little wild girls. Loud arguments. Young ladies who lock people out in the veranda and open the door for their suitors.

Kenan's mother looks through her bag, pulls out three wrapped hard candies, and drops them into Rewa's pouch.

"Your sister?" Kenan asks me.

"Cousin," I say.

"She's cute."

His mother says, "You too, sweetheart." I think she's talking to me, but she's looking over my shoulder. Malak shuffles into the room and takes the candy from her, mumbling a thank

you. Rewa hops away and Malak follows, glancing timidly back at me before disappearing behind the door.

Muaz says something to the girls when they walk in, and they laugh. For a moment, he's not the bully. Not the prankster. Not the worthless idiot. He's just my cousin.

"Did you hear anything when my cousin opened the door to let you in?" I ask Kenan, leaning slightly out of my chair. Our moms have just burst into chattering about some mutual friend they uncovered and have left us to talk on our own.

Kenan shrugs. "Yeah, but it's none of my business."

"Also, I wasn't ready when I opened the door. Did you peek? I bet you did."

He grins wide, and I notice a badly chipped tooth. I'm surprised it doesn't bother me. "Aren't we supposed to be talking about the future or something?" he says.

"You totally peeked." I lean back, feeling as flirty as Rachel. "At least tell me you liked what you saw. Or...don't," I add quickly, noticing his face change. "I don't think I want the answer to that."

He shakes his head. "How about this. You tell me what happened between you and the guy in the next room, and I'll tell you what I saw."

"Thought you said it was none of your business."

"It's not, but as someone who may or may not be interested I think I want to know why you locked a man outside in the heat."

His tone is far from accusatory, which is probably why it's easy for me to tell him exactly what happened. As I finish telling the story, I found myself rubbing a phantom itch from my nose. With my whole hand. "So what's the verdict? Am I a haqeera?"

"No," he says. "It was rude. Not lock-you-outside-rude, but still rude."

“Yeah, well...” I don’t know what to say. I feel my cheeks bloom a fancy shade of red.

He grins. “I’m kidding.” He straightens in his chair. and I do the same. “So, what are you looking for in a partner?”

“Well...” I never really thought about it. I mean, I did, but looking at him, I realized how superficial it was. I wanted to marry a blonde, blue-eyed, actor-faced man. I knew what build I wanted, what fashion sense, what job fields...but that’s it. I hated that that was all I had to give.

I take in the way he’s looking at me. Curiosity, warmth, kindness. He was far from a TV-face. Nothing that I would’ve wanted to date—but if this is more than first-day breathlessness, I wouldn’t even date him like they date on TV, and he isn’t looking at me like they look at each other on TV. This is raw. This is Mama and Baba. This is Khalo Bara reeling in three kids to Teita’s house. This is Khalti Meerna going to America because Amu Nabil had to leave. “I guess I’m just looking for someone who understands me,” I finally say. “What did you see when I opened the door? Don’t think I forgot about our little deal.”

He sighs dramatically. Okay, maybe we’re in a sitcom, but it’s My Syrian Sitcom. Good title, right? It takes him a moment, and the moment is filled with our moms’ laughter. Then he says, “I didn’t see anything. I turned my back once your cousin opened the door and went to call you. I knew something was going to be different when I walked in. I didn’t want to ruin my chances. Anyway, isn’t there always something happening at Teita’s house?”

As if on cue, the doorbell’s chirping rings through the room.

*Damascus, 2010*

## **I MEANT WHAT I SAID WHEN I TOLD YOU I COULD BUY SIX FALAFEL SANDWICHES FOR A HUNDRED LIRAS**

You just had to be smart about it. First you go to Amawi road, next to that old mosque with the white marble floors and flocks of pigeons circling above. Go to Abu Ammar's hole-in-the-wall shop in the haara just a block away. If he says *marhaba* and doesn't move from his stool, he's not Abu Ammar. Ask for Abu Ammar. When he comes, he'll say *ya hala* and lean against the massive counter, readjusting international call cards and moving boxes of chocolate as if to make room for you. He'll ask you if you want fousse or hummus. Ask for falafel. He'll smile and say *ala ainy* and disappear into the back room. Leave the shop and walk two blocks down to Hamza and Abbas. You can't miss the big blue sign with the yellow lettering. Stand and enjoy the air conditioning and the smell of pastries. Wait at the counter until a flour-puffed young boy greets you. Ask for three sugar buns. Threaten to seek them elsewhere if he tries to give them to you in any state other than *taza*. He'll ask for fifty liras. Tell him you know Abu Ammar. Pay twenty-five. Head down the street to pick up pickles and pickled turnips. Tell the vendor you want to have a taste. He'll hand you a small jar with an assortment and wave you off. Slide over twenty-five liras as a thank you, but he'll tell you to keep it. Leave it anyway. Go back to Abu Ammar's. He'll greet you as warmly as before, this time sliding over a white bag with grease stains blotting the bottom. *Nus dizzineh*, he'll say, opening the bag to show you the six patties lined in a ring around a small tub of garlic yogurt sauce. The smell will captivate you. Abu Ammar knows this, which is why he'll take one from his personal batch, dip it in yogurt, and hand it to you, on the house. The crunchy exterior made savory by the sauce has you all but drooling. Pay him fifty liras that he'll be insistent not to take. He'll tell you to send his salaams

to your father. You know he doesn't know your father, but you'll do it anyway. When you arrive home, split the buns in half, slice them open, and then fill with falafel, yogurt, pickles, and samma'a. Your mother will definitely have it in her spice cabinet; it's sour and red, you can't miss it. Invite your family to eat. Tell them about Abu Ammar. Tell them about how you bought six falafel sandwiches for a hundred liras.



*Homs, 2011*

## **NIGHTINGALE**

On our first night back in Syria, we drove straight to a protest in Hama. My cousin Muaz, Kareem, and I pushed through crowds of men multiplying by the minute, pouring out of mosques and shops, restaurants and apartment complexes. My brother ran ahead of me, his frayed, green McNabb jersey bobbing in and out of sight. “Come on, Munther,” he shouted over the commotion.

I cringed at the sound of my name. “It’s Monty,” I said, but the chanting drowned my voice out. Some guy nearly elbowed me in the gut, and I veered away just in time. “Kareem, slow down.” I couldn’t see him or Muaz anymore. I stumbled forward, shoving my way past people who smelled like sweat masked in Axe, past young boys clambering for a prime seat atop the shoulders of uncles and fathers, past people searching for a way out of the mob. I wouldn’t be able to get to Teita’s house in Homs on my own. I probably wouldn’t come home at all. I looked over my shoulder, expecting a man in uniform to grab my arm and drag me away. All it took was some officer to ask for my Syrian ID and take one look at Munther Nabil Shakfeh. The crowd constricted, and I had to stop moving. Their cheering did nothing to ease my panic. Someone grabbed me from behind and my heart jumped into my throat. I whipped around to see Kareem’s smiling face.

“Goddammit,” I spat.

“I called your real name, but you just kept pushing forward. Selective hearing?”

“Funny,” I said, shrugging his hands off. “Where’s Muaz?”

“Lost him. We’ll meet by the car.”

A chant echoed in unison across the spread of the crowd.

*“Alsha’ab yureed iskat al nizam! Alsha’ab yureed iskat al nizam!”*

“We shouldn’t be here. Baba’s going to kill us if he finds out.” Kareem ignored me, chanting along to the protest with his fist pounding the air.

I didn’t join in. I only came because I didn’t have a choice in the matter. Muaz picked us up from the airport and drove straight past Homs into Hama. I’d fallen asleep in the back seat. When Kareem shook me awake, the car was parked at some restaurant. Muaz said there was a protest starting soon, and that we’d better start running to get a good position. We were taking a risk being here, not just as protesters, but also as Nabil Shakfeh’s family.

#

I was eight years old the first time I’d visited Syria. Teita Haneen picked us up from Damascus International Airport and sped us down winding highways to her home in Homs where we would be staying for the summer. Between two airplanes, we had flown fourteen hours to get there, so a two-hour car ride wasn’t too terrible, especially with the demanding presence of our new Gameboys, and the three games Baba bought us as a parting gift. Since the Gameboy Color didn’t have a backlit screen, playing by passing lamplights was a challenge, and I was getting tired. Kareem had already fallen asleep. He’d insisted that since he was five years older and had longer legs, he could stretch out on my lap while resting his head against the window. Since I couldn’t play or sleep, I listened as Teita narrated family gossip to Mama. At one point, Teita asked Mama about our travels.

“Did they give you trouble?” Teita asked quietly.

“The wasta took care of it,” Mama said in an equally quiet voice, as if she knew I was listening. “I’ll have to call Saeed and thank him in the morning.”

I had heard the word wasta a lot before we left. At our home in suburban Chicago, I overheard Baba talking to Mama about how she had nothing to worry about once we got to Syria because his brother had given them a wasta. I wasn't sure what that was. Later in O'Hare International Airport, we met up with our neighbors who were also flying to Syria with the same connection as us: Chicago to Amsterdam to Damascus. Kareem ran off to say hello to his friend, showing off his new Gameboy. I was in the middle of a Pokémon battle and wasn't about to lose my chance at catching a Lugia, so I stayed in my seat next to Mama and listened to her talk to the lady. Khaleh was really excited for us and kept asking about our wasta. Who gave it to her? How did she get it? My mom mentioned Amu Saeed, my paternal uncle, who was in the military.

"Since Nabil's not with us, we should be fine," she had told Khaleh. I wondered why Baba couldn't have gone with us. Mama told me earlier he couldn't take off work at the law firm, but she hadn't mentioned it to Khaleh.

I counted the lampposts outside my window as Teita and Mama went on about family I didn't know. I lost track after a hundred and fifty something. Each lamppost had a picture of an old man pinned below, a word written underneath in swirling letters. I was still learning how to read Arabic, and the letters rolled around my tongue.

"M-min-nah-ha-bek? Min-ah-bik?"

"Menhibbak, dumbo," Kareem mumbled, sticking his arm between his head and the window's edge. He shifted his legs to a more comfortable position.

"Oh." I stared at the man smiling down on me, the Syrian flag a backdrop behind him. "That's the king, right?"

"President."

“Cool.” I tried to picture Bill Clinton’s face plastered on the walls and hung on lampposts. No matter how much I squinted, I couldn’t picture him. Maybe America didn’t love Clinton as much Syria loved— “What’s his name?”

“Hafez Al-Assad.”

“Is he a good president?”

“He’s dead.”

“Liar,” I said. “How do you know?”

He sighed and pulled himself upright. “It happened like last month.”

“Who’s president now?”

“His son—I forgot his name.” He glanced at the seat in front of him. “Mama? What’s Hafez Al-Assad’s son’s name?”

Mama turned to Kareem. “Habibi, why don’t you and your brother talk about something else, okay?”

“Why?” I put my hand on Teita’s seat and pulled myself close. “The sign says, ‘we love you.’”

Mama hesitated. “Tell Teita about the Legos you’ve been working on, Munther,” she said. Then, turning to Teita, she continued in Arabic, “Munther has small colorful blocks that he can make almost anything with.”

“Is that right?” Teita said in Arabic. “What did you make, habibi?”

I answered her in broken Arabic. Teita didn’t mind. She corrected some of my words and helped me finish my sentences. For the rest of my trip, I did not bring up the president or his dead father. I never forgot about it—it was difficult, considering their faces were everywhere—

but because nobody else, not a cousin, uncle, aunt, or grandparent had brought it up; I guessed I shouldn't either.

#

As we walked to the car after the protest and the crowds thinned, I kept looking over my shoulder. Muaz had found us, and soon the three of us walked alone, leaving behind bright lights and industrial skyscrapers. The roads were clear save for the street cleaners that roamed roads and alleys. With so many walking around, you'd think the streets would be cleaner. Mounds of garbage flooded both dumpsters and wastebaskets strapped to light poles. Food wrappers, bottles and plastic bags seemed to multiply around us.

"Hey, Munther, what did you think—"

"Monty," I said.

"What?"

"It's Monty. Get used to it."

Kareem spread his arms out, head tipped up to the heavens. "We're in *Hama*. You stand out more with *Monty* than you do Munther. What's your deal?" He turned to Muaz and spoke in Arabic. "Tell him it's stupid."

"I think it's tasteless," Muaz replied in Arabic.

I sighed, my hands digging deeper into the pockets of my jeans. "You've already slipped up. I bet you I got that extra search at O'Hare because you called me out and talked in Arabic. Who does that?"

"Arabs," my brother said. "Because we're Arab. It's not a hard concept to follow."

"You're talking too fast," Muaz said, fishing a cigarette out of his pocket. "Talk in Arabic?"

“That’s ridiculous. You don’t do that at an airport,” I said, and then switched to my broken tongue. “Whatever, that’s beside the point. I want you to get used to the name. We’ll be back in Chicago in a couple weeks.”

“Sure,” Kareem said. “I wish we could stay longer. What a time to be Syrian, huh? No one could’ve predicted this.”

I shook my head and spoke in English. “This isn’t something to be excited about. Wanna get yourself killed?”

Kareem switched to English, too. “They’re peaceful protests. We’re finally speaking out against this regime. Not just Hama this time, but all of Syria. We can do this.”

I couldn’t believe him. Sure, he kept in touch with our relatives year round while I limited myself to face-to-face interactions, but his connection to a country he’d visited only four times before this trip made no sense to me. “Who’s we? Kareem, you’re American. Born in Houston. You’re not Syrian. Stop pretending you are.”

Kareem stopped and turned on me. “The hell are you saying? You’re the son of an activist who’s exiled from the country. Don’t you want to make a difference?”

“*Bas*, both of you.” Muaz said sharply, before I could even open my mouth.

Something rattled in a dumpster nearby and we all tensed and turned. I could almost picture someone from the *mukhabaraat* popping out from between the garbage and arresting us. Best case scenario we’d be detained for a couple hours. Worst case? Torture? Holding us for ransom in exchange for my dad? I didn’t want to think about it.

A cat struggled out from under the gut-churning smell of trash that had been baking in the sun. The scraggly creature stared at us, its eyes glowing under lamplight. The cat flicked its tail and leapt out of sight.

Muaz gripped our shoulders and huffed. The smell of tobacco clung to my nose. “Talk quietly. Talk in Arabic. Or don’t talk at all.” He looked around and, seeing nothing but a few passing cars, he kept walking, taking a long drag from his cigarette.

Kareem and I followed, and Kareem’s question still hung in my head. Of course I wanted to make a difference. That was why I went into journalism instead of medicine, law, or engineering like every other Arab guy I knew. I wanted to engage with people, be a voice to go against the current biases about Muslims and Arabs in Western media. Yeah, I wasn’t the golden child of my faith or heritage, but it didn’t mean I didn’t care about either one, especially my faith. But it also didn’t mean I wanted to only report or advocate for the Middle East, either. I never wanted to be an international or foreign affairs journalist. Baba did his part in Syria. His country. I wanted to do my part in mine.

The hour-long drive to Teita’s house gave me time to rehearse my Arabic. My cousin Lujane had gotten engaged last year and really wanted my mom to come, but since she couldn’t take off work, she’d sent the two of us. The last time I travelled to Syria was for Jiddo’s funeral four years ago. I took two weeks off school—even though my second semester of ninth grade had just started—and went with my mom and brother. Of all the cousins on my mother’s side, Muaz took his passing the hardest. He always sat attentively when Jiddo cleared his throat, cleaned his glasses, and said, “Five liras to whomever can tell me what the Prophet, peace be upon him, said about...” while the rest of us groaned and ran away. When I flew in for the funeral, I saw my paternal cousin Nedda. I confided in her the most that year. She wasn’t committed to wearing hijab at the beginning of my trip. By the time I had to leave, she had it wrapped tightly around her head. I joked and told her I still remembered what her hair looked like. She said I would forget. I did.

#

When we got to Teita's house, Muaz's father opened the door. He greeted us warmly before berating Muaz for taking us to the protest. Nedda's little sister Tala peeked out of the living room and mouthed an apology to him. Muaz glared. I smiled.

While Kareem tried to save Muaz's ass, I rolled our suitcases to the guest bedroom I'd shared with my mom and brother the last time we were here. It was previously the "kids' room," where my mother and her four siblings slept. Just as I moved to open the door, I heard a soft, yet firm voice behind me.

"What are you doing?" Nedda said. She stood in doorway of the sunroom to my left. "That's my room."

"You're at the wrong Teita's house," I said, hiding my smile.

"Didn't your mom tell you? I'm going to school in Homs and needed a place to stay. In exchange, I'm helping her around the house for a bit. And that's my room."

I scoffed. "So you get a room with two beds, but me and my brother have to sleep in the living room?"

"I was here first. Here, I'll help make your beds. You can move your stuff to Jiddo's closet in the sunroom. It's empty." I knew that was not an uncommon setup in a Teita's house, piling up and sharing beds and couches, but having our clothes in Jiddo's closet didn't feel right. Still, I needed to at least hang the suits for Lujane's wedding before they wrinkled.

"I think I'll manage, but thank you."

"Okay, let me know if you need anything."

I walked to Jiddo's office-now-turned storage space. I pulled the closet open and Jiddo's musk puffed into my nose. I'd half-expected to see the black and white photographs collaged on



the insides of the wardrobe doors, but the wood was bare. When he passed, Teita asked the grandchildren to help her compile them into an album, a massive tome which was now sitting at the foot of the wardrobe.

I fished around for the suits. I knew Kareem had packed them together in his bag. Amid the clothes, my hand brushed against something curvy and lightweight. Curious, I pulled it out. A Guy Fawkes mask grinned up at me. I swallowed dryly and set it aside, continuing my search. Once I found the suits, I hung them in the closet, grabbed the mask, and went to find Kareem.

The house was quiet save for some rattling in the kitchen. Nedda was there, arranging Arabic coffee cups on a tray.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Kareem, Muaz, and Tala are on the balcony, and Khalo Gaith left. Teita’s asleep.” She turned to me, her eyes fixing on the mask in my hand before settling on my face. “Want *ahweh*?”

“Sure,” I said, and then remembered Arabic coffee was way too bitter for my taste. Still, I felt bad saying no.

“That’s a cool mask,” she said after a moment.

I shrugged. “It’s Kareem’s. I don’t know why he brought it with him.”

“Some people wear them to protests. I’m sure you’ve seen pictures?” She scooped grounded coffee into the coffee pot of boiling water on the stove and began to stir.

“I haven’t. I’ve never seen it on the news.”

She snorted. “Because it’s not in the news. You have to be on Twitter to see it.”

I sat at the breakfast table, setting the mask down next to the mushroom shaped salt-and-pepper-shakers. “I am on Twitter. I just...I don’t follow people from Syria.”

“What kind of journalist student are you? Or were you just lying on Facebook?”

“I’m not lying.” I know I’d updated my Facebook status a few months ago when I’d officially chosen my journalism major, but as far as I remembered she didn’t like or comment on it with the rest of my relatives. “I’m just not interested in international journalism.”

She looked at me like I was an idiot.

“What?” I tried to explain to her how Muslims and brown people in the US were targeted for their appearance, but she kept shaking her head.

“The problem is one and the same.” She started talking politics, but I couldn’t understand that thread of jargon in Arabic.

“So I take it you’re studying journalism, too?” I said mostly to get her to stop.

“Architecture,” Nedda said as she poured coffee into tiny porcelain cups. “I draw blueprints for buildings. Mostly residential but some industrial, too.”

“I’d love to see your work sometime.”

“Nedda,” Tala called from the living room. “Come see, Kareem recorded Qashoush.”

“Yalla, I’m coming. Wait for me,” Nedda said, and then turned to me. “Coming?”

I followed, leaving the mask on the table.

#

Outside was warm with cool tendrils of air that broke through the humidity. They’d arranged chairs in a U, all facing the city. Instead of taking a seat, I leaned against the metal railing, cooling my hands. From the eighth story balcony, the green glow of mosques spread across the city, surrounded by the yellows and oranges of street lamps and apartment buildings.

Muaz and Kareem recounted their favorite parts of the protest to Tala. Once Nedda passed around the coffee, Kareem tapped play on a video. “Qashoush. Got the whole song.”

Tala sat up and took the phone, her hijab slipping off her head. She pulled it back up with nimble fingers, but even then, her neck was showing.

Kareem and I weren't at all close to where Qashoush was standing, so the video was the crowd, hands in the air, clapping and cheering. I stayed leaning against the rail to give my cousins room to watch.

Muaz took a sip from his coffee, his face curling as he balanced the saucer on his thigh. "Your ahweh is awful, Nedda."

"I'd like to see you do any better." She swatted him on the shoulder with her phone and turned back to the video. "Now be quiet, I'm listening."

Qashoush was a poet nobody had heard of until the revolution. Now crowds went nuts when he sang at protests. From what I understood, his songs mocked the president and called for change. Some of the lyrics amused me, especially ones that likened Assad to a giraffe.

"Here comes my favorite part," Kareem said.

*Ya Bashar tuz feek w tuz yalli bihayEEK! Yalla irhal ya Bashar!*

Nedda and Tala laughed. Muaz whooped and threw his fist up, the cup of ahweh clattering violently on his leg. The crowd's cheering echoed their elation. I didn't care much when I was there, but watching it again with my cousins made me smile. *Tuz* was a crude street word, not a word you'd call the president of a country whose people can't even say the word "president" in any context without making people uncomfortable and scared.

When the video was over, even I was grinning.

"Wow. Bashar can't do anything about this," Tala said, sitting back in her chair. "There's just too many people."

“We’ve come so far so quick,” Kareem said, pocketing his phone. “Bashar’s outnumbered, and let me tell you, the world’s watching, too. He’ll be gone soon.”

“Insha’ Allah,” Nedda said, taking a seat. “Maybe we could all move back to Hama.”

“Insha’ Allah,” we all echoed. For a moment, I was pulled into their excitement. I listened to their stories of injustice by the hands of the regime. About people who got better grades because of some wasta, people getting better pay and better jobs because of who they knew, and how without one, it was easy to slip into poverty. I knew that aspect of it, having experienced it myself. Hafez al-Assad had exiled my dad. Without the wasta, there was no way Mama could’ve brought us to Syria when we were kids, and there was no way Kareem and I could’ve gotten into Syria now. I was deep in thought speculating about what Baba’s involvement could have been to warrant an exile that I missed the conversation shift.

I didn’t notice until Kareem said, “You think he’s dead?”

I looked up. “Who’s dead?”

“My dad’s friend Yaman, and we don’t know still,” Muaz said, his gaze switching between us. “Nobody told you guys? This happened years ago.”

Kareem and I shook our heads. “Baba doesn’t like to talk about that kind of stuff,” my brother said. Baba never talked about his time in Syria unless the stories were about his relatives and places he liked to visit, never about his role in helping with the Hama Uprising in ’82.

Muaz recounted the story. Yaman had a conversation with a customer about how everyone needed to vote for the opposition of the Ba’ath party. Muaz’s dad was working in the back, but he’d heard the whole thing. It wasn’t malicious talk, just opinionated, because the customer asked. Weeks later, Yaman’s car was found totaled on the side of the highway. The accident was filed as a hit-and-run. The report said the driver was taken to a hospital, so

Yaman's kids visited every hospital in the area; there was no sign of him, no records that validated that statement. He vanished.

Everyone went silent. Nedda took sips from her ahweh. From our Syrian bubble in Chicago, we always heard jokes like, "don't talk shit about the president back home or you'll wind up dead in some alley." It was jokes back then, not some dystopian reality.

"So if he's not dead," I found myself saying. Everyone turned to look at me. I wish I hadn't spoken. Taking a sip of my coffee, I hoped to hide my awkward pause. It was more bitter than I remembered. I felt like the dumb, clueless foreigner that none of the natives liked. Except the natives were my family and what did that make me? "If he's not dead, where would he be?" I ended quietly.

"Probably in prison," Tala said, tying her Converse laces. Surprised, we all turned to look at her. "There's this underground one in Damascus near the military airport. I hear they keep people there undocumented. I hope they killed him. Death would be more humane than whatever Assad's dogs do to their prisoners." She tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear, still somewhat exposed under her filmy hijab. She was no older than fifteen. I knew she wasn't a hijabi. She'd told me months ago on Facebook that she wasn't sure if she wanted to wear it yet, so she was trying it out. I told her that was dumb and it shouldn't be a hard choice, especially living in Syria where most of the women wore it. I didn't see this timid girl now. In minutes I felt like she aged ten years. Girls her age were supposed to talk about the latest TV shows, movies, clothes, and whatever else. Not the psychology of torture and death.

"That would never happen in the America," Kareem said, shaking his head. "It's not perfect, but at least families know where their loved ones are, and everyone has a right to a trial."

I wasn't sure why my brother was bringing up America. I wondered if I sounded like a privileged ass when I said stuff like that, too.

For a while, nobody answered. I swirled the undrinkable slime of coffee that settled in the bottom of my cup. Muaz finally broke the silence and said, "If these protests do some good and Assad leaves, they'll let him go. The system will have less loopholes."

"If he's still alive," Tala said.

"We need to pray they don't take any more people after these protests," Nedda said.

Kareem waved her off. "Don't worry. No regime would murder nonviolent protesters, especially if half the city is out there. It'll look bad. As long as we stay nonviolent, nothing's going to happen."

A loud boom crashed above us and we all flinched, jerking our heads up. Fireworks exploded in the sky some miles away.

#

The next day, Baba called. I could tell he was talking to me from his car. He was talking too loud, as he usually did when he spoke via Bluetooth or ordered at a drive-thru.

"How are you?" he asked me in Arabic.

"I'm fine, Baba. We're all fine." I glanced at my watch and calculated the time difference. "You just get out of work?"

Despite my English reply, he still spoke in Arabic. "Stuck in traffic. I wanted to remind you to find someone who can take you to the airport."

"Don't worry. I've already talked to Khalo Gaith and he's willing to take us."

"Tamam. Did you pick up the things your mother asked for?"

“Uh. Working on it.” There were three things she’d asked me to bring back: pastries, some white hijabs, and sheer socks. The first item was easy, but the other two I wouldn’t be able to get alone. I made a mental note to ask Nedda.

“Don’t forget. Yalla, I’ll see you in a week. Don’t do anything stupid. Stay away from the protests.”

“You got it.”

“Where’s Kareem? Is he around you?”

“Yeah, one sec.” I found him in the kitchen talking to Teita, who was stirring rice in the largest pot I’ve ever seen. The medley of seasoned, buttery rice and chicken wafted over and had me drooling.

“Kareem, it’s Baba,” I said.

He took the phone and left the room. I took his place on Teita’s left, wondering if I could get full on the smell of the rice alone.

“Know what this is?” Teita asked.

“Kabseh,” I answered. “Mama makes it all the time.”

“She learned from the best. I taught it to her when she was only twelve years old. She would stand over my shoulder, like you are now, and ask me questions like ‘how much did you put?’ and ‘what was that spice?’ Even then, habibi, you will see. My kabseh is something else.”

“I bet she did that so she could get the first taste.”

She laughed, her wrinkles curling into smiles. She grabbed a spoon from the drawer and scooped up some rice. “Here.”

I spooned it all into my mouth and burned my tongue. Worth it. “It’s delicious,” I said.

“I will teach your wife someday.”

“Sure. Someday.” I laughed nervously. “Where’s Nedda?”

“In her room, packing. She’s going back to Damascus to pick up her dress for the wedding.”

At that moment, Kareem’s voice went from being barely audible to a shout. I ran into the sitting room. He was facing the window, hand tearing at his hair. “There are so many people going out, nothing’s going to happen. I don’t know why you’re not supporting this. I thought you would, considering.” He was such a dumbass for telling Baba. I could hear him yelling back on the line. Actual yelling. The line cut shortly after.

Kareem shoved the phone at my chest and shouldered away. I knew better than to confront him now.

I went to the guest bedroom and knocked on Nedda’s door. “Nedda, it’s Monty.”

“Who’s Monty?” Nedda called back.

“Come on, Nedda.”

“No, call me Nadine, now. Je suis français.”

I tried not to gratify her with an answer. “Just open the door. Please?”

“Give me a minute.” She shuffled around, and not long after, she opened the door. Nedda adjusted her hijab. It looked hastily thrown on, and I saw a strand of hair slithering its way out from under the shawl. It would probably be a bad idea for me to point it out.

“What?”

“What? Oh. What are you doing today? My mom wants a few things, and I could really use your help.”



“Can’t. My brother’s picking me up in a few hours. Mama wants us home by dinner, and I still need to pack.”

“What if I help you? You’d be done sooner.” I probably sounded desperate, but I hoped that part was lost in translation.

“Are all Americans this weird?” she asked, but pushed the door open.

I stepped in to see the two full beds draped with the same comforter I remembered sleeping under as a kid. On top of it, however, a large mound of clothes and hangers covered one; a giant suitcase covered the other.

“You’re packing all this for a visit?”

“No. Those were in my suitcase. I hadn’t unpacked yet.” She looked embarrassed.

“Wow, you’re worse than me.” I sat on the edge of the bed with the suitcase. “What do you want me to do?” I asked, knowing she’d probably not want me going through her things unsupervised.

“I’ll give you clothes to hang up.” She tossed me a few blouses. “Should be easy enough for a man to do.” I didn’t reply to her comment so I wouldn’t accidentally piss her off. I needed her help with my mother’s shopping list, so I turned to the task at hand, putting the hangers on first before heading to the wardrobe at the foot of the bed. The double doors opened soundlessly. I stuck the hangers on the empty rack and noticed a tough fabric like a tarp draped over the floor of the wardrobe. I lifted the edge up and saw small canvases lined up side by side.

“Leave those alone,” Nedda said.

I didn’t listen. I pulled the tarp off and stared. A couple paintings were pleasant. Roses. A girl in a pink patterned hijab. The rest were grim. Angry red shades. Black smears. Grey crumbles. “What are these?”

“Why don’t you listen, *ghabi*!” She pushed me away, and I stumbled back in surprise. She quickly put the tarp back on, smoothing it over the paintings.

“Why are you keeping these secret? Does Teita know?”

She sighed and turned to me. “No, she doesn’t. I don’t want anyone to be held responsible if something bad happens, so don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.” I went back to hanging clothes, but I couldn’t resist for long. “Are they about ’82?”

She stared at me like she didn’t want to answer that question, and I was about to tell her she could drop it before she responded. “They are. My dad told me stories about what he’d been through and what he’d seen in the streets. I started making them when the Arab Spring started in Tunisia. I don’t want ’82 to be forgotten. That was a revolutionary uprising, too, and look what happened when no one else stood with us?” The way she kept her voice leveled shocked me, as if we were having a conversation about kabseh. “You know in Damascus, they don’t even call it the ‘massacre’ or the ‘uprising’? They call it the ‘Events’ of Hama. Events. I don’t want people to forget that they weren’t ‘events.’ People died. My grandmother. Khalti Samar, Khalo Haider, and Ghazwan died.”

I was quiet for some time. I wished Baba had told me how bad it was. I didn’t even know how he got out. “Why don’t you show others your work? You said you don’t want people to forget. How can they not if you don’t let them see?”

“I do let them see.” She pulled out her phone, tapped a few times and handed it to me. “This is my Twitter. I post pictures of the artwork on there.”

She had thousands of followers and only twenty-six tweets. Each tweet featured a painting. The first letter of her name, written in thin calligraphy was on the right corner of every

piece. I noticed there was no personal information on the page other than her location, which she'd set to Syria. She couldn't be more anonymous.

"These are amazing, Nedda."

She smiled. "Don't you want me to help you? You've got clothes to hang." She held her hand out, and I gave her the phone back.

Silence settled between us again. I wondered about the kind of person Baba was in Syria. I wondered if he'd stuck around, would he have been killed? How did he leave? I was sure Nedda's dad had something to do with it.

Before I could ask if she knew anything, she said, "So, why Monty? That's the silliest name I've ever heard. You could have gone with Jamesbond or Leonardo if you wanted an American name."

I grinned. "Well, it's close to Munther. I don't like to stand out and deal with mispronunciations. I'm not *Mawn*-ther or *Moan*-ther, and they don't know how to try anything else without guidance. Plus, it's a gruff name."

"Gruff?" she repeated. That was the only English word I used amid my not-so-polished Arabic.

"Yeah, like one that's angry, like a growl?" She still looked confused. "Never mind."

"Whatever the reason, I like your name. It means...like...*natheer*. One who is *natheer*?"

"I don't know what that means," I admitted. We laughed. "I was named after someone. My mom said my name means 'good tidings.' Here, I have an idea." I pulled out my phone and went into a translator app. I spelled out *natheer* in English and hoped it would automatically spell it correctly in the Arabic alphabet when I hit space. "It says... 'match'? That doesn't make any sense."

“Let me see.” Nedda took my phone, then smiled, shaking her head. “Wrong letter. I’ll spell it for you.” She handed it back a moment later.

“Harbinger,” I said. Nedda shrugged. After a quick search, I got the general gist to be someone who forewarns something. According to a baby name website for Muslim babies (who knew that such a thing existed) the Prophets were known as “*munthers*” or “warners.” I questioned my mother’s choices. I tried my best to translate what I found. “How’s that a nice name to have?”

“The Prophet’s warnings brought ‘good tidings’ to the people.”

“I don’t know. Monty’s easier for almost everyone I know.”

“I’m going to call you Munther.”

#

On our way out of Teita’s building, I asked Nedda if we were going to the souk. She said there was no need to since Teita’s haara had all the essentials and she didn’t want to risk getting stuck in traffic by going to the souk where the roads were bustling with too many cars and people. The ten-minute walk was nice, a few apartment buildings down and to the left. We passed a store that only sold orange juice and lemon juice, several hair salons with large signs that read “women only,” art studios, sandwich shops, snack shacks. At one point we had to get off the sidewalk as a few workers painted over old obituaries, signs, and ads on a section of a concrete wall. I caught glimpse of a photo of Hafez Al Assad with horns and a tail sprayed in red graffiti before one of the workers smeared black paint over it. When we made it to a section of the haara riddled with shops, Nedda helped me pick up those special socks and what she assured me were the best hijabs in Homs for my mother. Not long after, Tala and their brother Farouk picked her up.

While she was gone, I tried to sneak into her bedroom to see the paintings, but she'd locked the wardrobe. I looked under the bed, as one might when snooping around, expecting to see stacks of hidden canvases but I didn't. Instead, there were four thin sticks of wood that I figured was a disassembled easel. I wondered where she kept her paints. I wanted to snoop around more, but the front door creaked open, and I made a quick escape.

#

On the day of the wedding, the house was more chaotic than usual. Relatives came and went, mostly the women of the family who hung out either before or after their hair appointments at one of the salons in the haara. Kareem and I tried to stay out of their way but no matter what room we went into, there were women yelling at us not to look, covering their coiffed heads. Soon, we gave up and left. We returned just before the men's wedding celebration was about to start. Teita was already gone, and the house had emptied. She left out a humble spread of cheeses, olives, cucumber, and hummus. We had a bite to eat before getting up to dress. As I walked to the sunroom, I heard shuffling in Nedda's room. I thought she would have left by now. The women's wedding party started an hour ago.

I knocked on her door. "It's Mon—Munther," I said.

"I'm busy," came the curt reply.

"Why aren't you at the wedding? Is everything alright?" Silence. "Nedda let me in."

I counted to twenty. If she didn't open, I'd leave and try again before I left. As I turned to go, I heard footsteps. She opened the door and walked away, whipping an end of her hijab over her shoulder. Didn't even greet me. Her dress hung in a giant bag on the outside of the wardrobe. She took a seat on the bed; the back of the easel was facing me so I couldn't see what she was working on.

“Shut the door behind you,” she said.

Despite the taboo, I did. *When a man and a woman are alone together, the third among them is the devil.* I thanked the sheikh in my brain for that valuable insight.

I walked around and stared at the canvas. There was a light sketch done in pencil, and she was painting over it in greenish-beige. Light glared on the fresh paint, making it hard to see.

“What are you working on?”

“Did you check the news? Twitter? Anything?”

“No, I don’t have—”

“Qashoush is dead.”

I blinked. I must have misheard. “What?”

“They found his body in the river this morning. His vocal cords were cut from his throat.”

Her voice cracked. I noticed her eyes were red.

I sat down. Watched her paint. Paint. Painting a picture. Stroke. Stroke. Dip. Stroke. Mix. Dip. Mix. Qashoush is dead. Stroke. Stroke. I heard Kareem calling me. I would have ignored him, but he was calling me Monty for once, and I thought I should answer.

I took one last glance at Nedda’s work and met Kareem in the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“Qashoush is dead.”

“I know, I just heard.”

He frowned. “From where? It was just breaking news on TV.”

“Uh, Twitter,” I said. “It’s terrifying. Sickening. The people aren’t going to stand for this.” I thought about Nedda and realized she wasn’t crying because she was sad. She was angry.

“It’s not going to scare people away, it’s going to rile them up.”

Kareem rubbed his neck and looked away. I didn't know what to say. This wasn't the reaction I'd expected from him. "Was the picture also on Twitter?" he said finally, "I don't think I'll ever be able to get it out of my head."

"Yeah." I assumed so, though I didn't think I wanted to see it. I found out shortly after that there was no way to avoid it. I caught a glimpse of the picture on TV, and then again as I was scrolling through Facebook in the cab on the way to the wedding. And again on Twitter as we found our seats. Kareem and I agreed not to mention it to the couple or their family when we got there.

The wedding went by in a blur. Wedding guests talked about the news in between tea sips and cake bites, in between small talk and family gossip. In attempts to unwind and get away from the news, I joined the dabke circles. I stood between an uncle and some random dude twirling a ring of prayer beads and tried to lose myself in the rhythm of the tabl and mizmar. My cousin dominated the center, showing off some fancy footwork that put my attempts to shame. In between synchronized kicks and hand swinging, I spotted Kareem at a table, his phone casting a pale glow on his face. I parted the circle, bumped into Lujane's husband, congratulated him, and wove my way around the dance circle to meet my brother.

"Khalo Bara can really move," I said.

"Yeah." He didn't look up from his phone.

"You should say hi to family. They keep asking about you."

"Yeah."

I snatched the phone from his hand. "What's up with you?"

He glared at me but didn't want to make a scene of taking the phone back. "I'm just not feeling a wedding right now, okay?" It looked like he wanted to say more. He sighed. "I just want to get back to Chicago. I'm not feeling any of this."

#

When I got home later that night, Nedda's light outlined her door in the dark hallway. I didn't think she ever left. I knocked softly.

"Go away, Munther. I'm serious."

"You missed the wedding."

No answer. I waited, longer than I should have. Knocked again. Nothing.

Since Kareem was in the bathroom, I went and sat in the living room, scrolling through Facebook. I clicked on a YouTube video of some protest. An error message popped up saying it was blocked in my country. I used a proxy Muaz taught me to get around it. Qashoush's voice came through loud. The guy recording yelled something. I had to play it twice to hear, "Hama, June 27, 2011!" The same protest I'd attended. I wanted to try and spot my brother's McNabb jersey in the crowd, and then I thought I was being stupid.

I understood the lyrics a little more each time I listened. The jaunty words, so confident, made Qashoush seem untouchable. I respected the courage it took to stand up and call for change, yet he paid for it. I couldn't imagine Syrians, hell, the entire world, not rising up after this. How could anyone side with a government that ripped out a singer's vocal cords to send a message?

Kareem came into the room, adjusting his pajamas. "Stop listening to that song. It's getting depressing."



I paused the video. “Okay, hang on. I thought you were all gung-ho about fighting with our family for the same freedoms you have back home. Weren’t you expecting this?”

He whipped the bed sheets and slapped them over the couch. “Cut me some slack. The guy was just murdered, don’t you think it’s a little painful?”

Of course it was, but if we stopped talking about him, we were doing what the regime wanted. I should have said that, but instead I just nodded and turned it off.

Kareem went to bed early that night. Teita was up doing extra nightly prayers. For a woman in her sixties, I was surprised she had the strength to go through the motions for hours on end despite her back problems. I heard Nedda’s door open, her footsteps receding into the bathroom. Before I could talk myself out of it, I sprinted to her room. The canvas was still propped on the easel. I needed to see.

It looked finished, but there was freshly squeezed paint on her palette. Qashoush’s head was tilted towards the heavens, his neck blotted red as the pictures had shown. Emerging out of the wound was a bloodstained white bird, wings spread wide.

I stared at it for a long time. My eyes stung, and I rubbed them.

She’d be coming back soon. I pulled out my phone, snapped a picture, and hurried out.

The living room was pitch black, so I switched on a lamp. Kareem groaned. “Let me sleep.”

“Sit up, I want to show you something.”

He mumbled under his breath and pulled himself up. I plopped down next to him and went to my photos. I was about to show him the picture I’d just taken, but I knew I couldn’t lie about where I’d got it from. So I went to Twitter instead and pulled up Nedda’s profile. “You wanted a ‘peaceful movement’, here you go. Look at the paintings this artist came up with.

People get behind that, just look at the followers.” Kareem didn’t reply, so I continued.

“Remember when our Egyptian friends asked us if we thought Syria was going to rise up next? We laughed. We laughed and said they were insane. Why’s that?”

He gave me the “you’re a dumbass” look, which I ignored by staring him down until he answered. “Baba said it best when he said it’s ‘cause Syria’s ‘secretly militarized.’ Intelligence and undercover agencies shutting people up.” He sighed. “What the fuck were they thinking, Munther?”

“Did you expect Assad to just step down?”

Kareem rubbed his eyes as if trying to distort a freshly painted image. “It’s just so *real*. There hasn’t been a single violent attack against the regime and now we have a poet with his throat cut. I don’t know. Maybe it’s a lost cause.”

I didn’t know what to think. I shook my head and left to go change out of my suit.

Before I went to bed, I checked Twitter again. Nedda’s newest piece was live. She had posted a few minutes ago and was already at a hundred favorites and thirty-five retweets. By morning, the numbers rose to over two thousand favorites and almost a thousand retweets. I went to congratulate her. The door was wide open, the room void of any trace of her fevered art session.

I found her in the sunroom, tugging at the topmost bag in a stack of bags towering above Jiddo’s wardrobe. They looked like they were going to topple over her. “Traveling again?” I asked.

“Help me out. I think it’s caught on something.”

I found a chair and dragged it over. Then, lifting the bag from the other end, I freed her strap from another bag’s handle and helped her lower it to the floor.

“I got it from here. Thank you.”

I followed her to her room. “Your painting has so many views now, did you see? Congratulations.”

“Really? Haven’t looked since I posted.”

“Liar.”

She smiled. “Maybe a little.”

“So where are you going anyway? Back to Damascus?”

“Yeah.” She threw some clothes into the bag, tossing hangers onto the tarp hiding her paintings. “My mom’s not feeling well. I’ll be back in time for the first day of school.”

“Hope she’s better soon.” I watched her closet empty and knew the trip was longer than she was letting on. “You taking the paintings?”

She stopped mid-fold, the polyester skirt sliding away from the creases she’d made. “I can’t. Last week we ran into a new checkpoint. They searched Farouk’s entire car and all our bags. I can’t get them out of here probably ever. I’ll probably burn them or discreetly throw them away.”

That sounded outrageous, all that hard work to be thrown out. I hated that it made perfect, logical sense. “Do you think I could get them out of the country? Take them back to America with me?”

Nedda and I turned to the door as Teita called for assistance from the kitchen. “Sure. Show them your American passport and you’ll be fine.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. I can’t do anything with them. I have the photos. Just make sure to take them off their boards and wrap them up well so they don’t get bent.” She sidled past me and answered

Teita. I looked to the tarp, the hangers tangled atop those paintings. How could she give them up so easily? I supposed in life or death situations, it was an easy choice.

#

A few days after she left, we received word that Nedda never made it home. Like Yaman, she vanished.

I did not panic the first day or the second. Maybe they had gotten lost? Taken a detour? On the third day, Farouk was found just outside Hama's city limits, badly beaten but alive. There was no sign of Nedda. I locked myself in the guest bedroom, staring at her artwork. How did they know?

I cooped myself up in that room, ignoring knocks, visitors, everyone. Would they dare hurt a woman? They wouldn't. Would they? Kareem knocked on the door. I didn't answer.

Hours later, my phone pinged. I made Muaz add me to a secret Facebook group that arranged protests. The notification told me there was one happening at 11pm in Hama. A two hour drive I could definitely make. I went to the sunroom to get something to wear. I half expected to see Jiddo's pictures on the inside of the closet door again, but the Fawkes mask smirked down at me instead. I didn't know who taped it there, but I assumed Nedda. I sat on the floor. She'd want me to do this. I took a deep breath, stood up, changed into something black. I went back into the room to hide the art I'd spread out and paused as I saw Kareem observing them.

"Thought you went to sleep," I said. My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat.

"This is why they took her? What the fuck, man." Red, glazed eyes looked me over for the first time. "You going out?"

"Yeah."

“You know two people were shot at a protest yesterday? People are being detained left and right.”

“Yeah.” I started stacking up the canvases.

“Yeah? And you’re still going?”

“Are you gonna stop me?”

“I won’t let you get taken or killed. You said it yourself. It’s dangerous.”

I stopped stacking, my hand on painting of Qashoush. “Tell that to the hundreds of people showing up to these every night. If we stop now, we’re letting Assad win.” It came out before I realized it. We. They were a part of me. I wouldn’t let them down.

Kareem crossed his arms. I was reminded how much bigger he was than me. “This isn’t our fight. In a few days we’ll be flying out of here. There are other ways to help.”

I held up the painting. “I’m carrying this at the protest. People are angry. People are scared. This will bring them hope.”

He took a step forward. “Sorry, but I’m not letting you go.”

“You can’t stop me.” I tried to push past him but he barred the way. I shoved him with my right side, the canvas in my left hand. “Move.”

“You’re. Not. Leaving.” He pushed back, and I let the canvas drop. I lunged, elbowing him in the gut while pushing him back. He hit the wardrobe and it smacked the wall, rattling the hangers inside.

“What’s going on?” Teita shuffled into the hallway in her nightgown, squinting at the two of us.

“Nothing—” I said.

“Munther’s trying to go to a protest.” He grabbed me in a headlock and turned me around. I stumbled back and fell on my ass. He went down with me, holding me tight as I struggled against his thick arms.

“Let me go, Kareem!”

“Not until you calm down.”

“Kareem, leave him alone,” Teita said.

His arms tensed around my neck for a second before they relaxed. I pulled him off and rose to my feet. “Don’t touch me again,” I spat.

“Munther, habibi, come with me,” she said.

I glared at Kareem and followed her to the kitchen. She asked me to take a seat as she pulled out the box of teas and turned on the electric kettle. I sat down and drummed a hand on the table. I checked my watch. An hour and forty-five minutes till the protest.

A few minutes later, Teita poured a single cup of tea and set it on the table along with the sugar bowl. She sat beside me. I took a sip of tea and allowed the aroma to linger. I remembered Nedda scooping sugar from that jar into the coffee, eyeing the Fawkes mask like she knew something. Always one step ahead.

“I miss her. I know you do, too,” Teita said. I looked up but didn’t say anything. “You remind me of Nabil. Your mother married your father two years before ’82. When the uprising happened, there was fire in his eyes. He came to me and said that we deserve better than this. A better Syria for our children. I told him it was too dangerous, especially for his brothers. His father. The regime would take their life away. He said they weren’t living. I knew that night there would be no way to stop him. That same fire I saw in his eyes, I see in yours. I can’t stop

you, I know, but I ask that you think about your family. The mukhabaraat are in the streets. They are identifying and taking note. Just think about that.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to go speak to Kareem. Allah yehmeek.” She kissed my temple and left.

I drank my tea. Baba fought for a better life. I could imagine him talking to other activists and boosting their spirits. My dad, the silver-tongued lawyer. I smiled to myself.

Teita had pulled Kareem into the living room and shut the door. I snuck past the closed door went to the sunroom, pulling Jiddo’s closet open. The tape ripped off, and I caught the mask before it could fall. Kareem wanted to wear it to stand out and yet stay anonymous in the protests, freedom of speech within Syria, without the consequences. The smirk mocked me. Come on, it said, don’t be a fool. Everything you do has consequences, so what are you going to do about it? I decided that when I got back to the States, I was going to write about Nedda. I was going to show people her art. I went back to the room. I scanned the paintings of the crumbling, red-smeared Hama. My Hama. I picked up the Qashoush painting I had dropped earlier. I stared at him, at the bird soaring from his neck. I would write about what’d I’d seen, show people this side of me, but for now, I put on the mask.

*Damascus, 2012*

## **FIVE-STEP APRICOT JAM**

### **Step One: Pick the ripest fruit.**

Sweet-scented farmlands were a welcome change from the four graying stone walls of my parents' house that had closed in on me over the years. I had outgrown the place as much as I had outgrown my mother's insistent demands to stand taller, talk softer, stifle that laugh of yours, light up coals for baba's hookah, serve coffee to the guests (they have sons, you know). I wouldn't mind if she cared about my schooling as much as she cared about marrying me off. I wouldn't have done well in college and graduated with a business degree if it weren't for Ahmad.

He smelled like apricots and freshly spun pottery. His love for the earth and his laugh, smooth as stones skipping water, grounded me in bliss and had me praying he felt for me what I felt for him. One day, he asked if there could be more between us than friendship. I gave him my mother's number.

I found out during our first formal meeting that his family owned the majority of the apricot farms that distributed to restaurants and major markets in and around Damascus. The women of his family also made and sold apricot jam.

Ahmad said, "If it works out between us, you'll learn our secret recipe, too." We were engaged a week later, married in six months.

On our wedding day, Mama tried to help my mother-in-law, Huda, with the arrangements. Ahmad's family had chosen one of the most expensive venues in Damascus, known for its pearl marble floors, colossal, glittering chandeliers, and exquisite buffet spreads.



“He’s a catch,” Mama said as she fussed over one of the many bouquets the florist had set on wedding stage. “Handsome. Rich. Nice family.”

“I know,” I said, crossing my arms over the zip up hoodie I’d put on that morning before my hair appointment. “You need to stop rearranging the flowers. You’ll ruin the florist’s work.”

“I just want everything to be perfect.”

“It will be.”

The heady lights blazing above, and the ballroom of hundreds of ladies, warm bodies moving like a single entity awakening, would have melted my makeup had it not been for the setting spray the makeup artist spritzed once when she had finished and again right before the wedding began. I danced until having feet under my puffy white dress was more a concept than reality, and then I danced some more. The camerawoman guided the spotlight-camera fixture to record my every twirl, every laugh, and every private moment with friends and family.

When the time came for Ahmad to enter, ladies draped hijabs over their hair and threw on coats or abayas. Several hands worried over me, fixed my makeup, freshened me up with expensive perfume, and checked my teeth and hair. Everyone sat except Huda, Mama, and I, who stood on the stage. With the guests covering their bright eveningwear, the room seemed to dim. The doors opened. Ahmad stood at the double doors, my face warmed as I took him in. He picked me. He was mine. His chiseled face was easier to see with his beard shaven, eyes bright as he caught my eye. He counted his paces like the camerawoman taught us and made his slow path towards me. We kissed on the cheek. Held hands.

“You’re beautiful.” He flashed a smile at the camera. He then covered his mouth and whispered in my ear. “You’d think they would run out of memory by now.”

I laughed. He took my hand and led me to the buffet room for photographs before our guests devoured the food. We strolled along the dessert table last, admiring heart-shaped fruit arrangements, French pastries including a circular tray of éclairs with the words “Mabrook Rula!” and a graduation cap piped in chocolate icing at the center. Finally, we paused at the wedding cake, a six-tiered, pearly-white work of art bejeweled with edible crystals. I did my best to hold an expressionless face as I observed the cake topper. The groom’s boasted a graduation cap and gown fitted over his tux, while the bride’s wore a standard wedding dress with a mesh veil that limped down her back.

The camerawoman gestured at me to say something. I squeezed his hand tighter and pecked him on the cheek. “I love it,” I cooed. “Where’s my cap and gown, Ahmadie?” I giggled as he unsheathed the ceremonial sword to cut the cake. The camerawoman shot me a thumbs-up.

“There’s no room for it on top of the veil.” He said with a chuckle and guided my hand to the hilt. “Shall we?”

With his hand gently gripping mine, we descended each layer. His earthy scent peeking through the musky cologne comforted me, reminding me that this is what home smelled like.

### **Step Two: Split in half and remove the hard pits.**

We lived with his family in a four-story villa that overlooked acres and acres of apricot trees. At first, I was hesitant to move in with my in-laws. My friends who lived with theirs always seemed miserable, complaining of lack of space and privacy. But the villa being so huge, I didn’t think it was a problem. Huda let us have the third floor entirely to ourselves.

Ahmad couldn’t wait to show me the grounds. “We have peaches, too,” he said as we strolled through the rows and rows of apricot trees, “but they’re just for us.” He led me to the

row closest to the villa and showed me the peach trees. He picked a ripe one, peeled its skin and fed it to me. I'd never tasted anything sweeter. The apricots, I learned, were just as sweet. Only the ones that ripened too quickly, the ones that were so sweet they were almost bitter, were sent downstairs to be made into jam by the women of the family.

While Ahmad met with supermarket executives and businessmen, I sat with Huda, halving apricots and discarding pits. The pits clung to the apricots' soft flesh like ticks. My mother-in-law drove a spoon into a particularly difficult one. "With a little pressure, you can do just about anything." When Ahmad came home, I asked if I could help with the business side of the company, so we could work together like we did in school. "That job's for the men in the family. It would be strange," he said.

For the next few months, I tried to pressure Ahmad into taking me to his meetings, my business degree itching to be useful. When he left his office to check the irrigation systems, I went to his study. His mahogany desk was hidden under a disorganized paper heap. I began sorting documents by company and purpose. Several times, I noted the government seal, a golden bird with the Syrian flag like a shield against its chest, and placed those documents in a special pile. Among reports, orders, and requests were several checks that hadn't been deposited. The ones by the government were hefty. If I had ever wondered how they afforded the villa before, I didn't anymore.

An hour later, Ahmad found me cross-legged on the office floor, surrounded by papers, his desk wiped clean.

"What are you doing?" His chest rose with his voice rose. "What did you do?"

"I was only helping," I said, moving to my feet. "I can do this."

"No, you can't. I said you couldn't. You're not allowed to."

I stepped out of the circle of papers. “You’re going to tell me that? After all the work we did together, after all the talks of working together. Was it all empty talk?”

His eyes were as hard as a soldier’s. It was the first time I felt afraid of him. I walked away with his stinging handprint on my cheek. I never asked or helped again.

**Step Three: Boil halves on the stove with sugar until flesh sweats and shrinks. Juices must begin to thicken.**

Ahmad rarely laid an angry hand on me after that. The few times he did—times when he was in a mood or I had said something to upset him—shocked us both. He would immediately apologize and try to make up for it with gold necklaces, silk dresses, and once, World Cup tickets. From what I’ve heard, all men have tempers, and I was fortunate Ahmad wasn’t as bad as the others. Most of the time, his excitement over work, our strolls through the grounds, and our delightful dinners kept us both content. We shouted and threw popcorn at the TV during our nightly Turkish soap opera viewings. Sometimes he gave back massages that made my muscles melt into his. Not a year later, my belly swelled, and, with it, my marriage. When I told Ahmad the news, he picked me up like he did on our wedding day, spinning me until I laughed.

Hatim Shakfeh burst into the world so suddenly, I almost had him in the car. An easy birth for my first. Hatim was the spitting image of me, every bit a momma’s boy. Business, however, wasn’t in his interest. When he was a boy, he liked to take apart my father-in-law’s radio and put it back together. As he got older, he moved to a boom box. A keyboard. A telephone. A computer. Once, when he was nine, no matter how much he tried, he could not get my new Motorola RAZR flip phone to turn on again after taking it apart. Ahmad came home and

lost his temper. The veins in his arms rose to the surface. He yanked his shoe off and went after the boy. Hatim cried for hours, cradling the bottoms of his feet.

“Your son needed discipline,” Ahmad huffed as he turned his back on me in bed, ignoring my red-rimmed eyes and request to talk about it further.

I didn’t want any more children, so I had my friend buy me birth control pills that I took every night when Ahmad went to sleep. Eight years later, much to my husband’s delight, I had Laith Shakfeh. A twelve-hour labor. The nurses had to strap my arms to the bed so I wouldn’t run away.

#### **Step Four: Pour mixture into a large, shallow pan and let cool.**

A few months after the country rippled with revolution, rebels attacked military convoys reporting to airport base. A grenade went off on the outskirts of the farm, burning almost a dozen apricot trees into husks before we could put the fire out. My father-in-law had us move into the Shakfeh weekend villa, a slightly smaller mansion in Madaya, near the bustling, sloped city of Zabadani. The entire drive up the mountain, with Ahmad’s swerving, I thought we were going to hit the jagged cliffs looming above us or, worse, plummet.

Hatim sat in the back, the seats littered with his open textbooks, some leaning against Laith’s car seat, a book residing in the two-year-old’s lap. Laith riffled through it, pretending to be engrossed in theories of mechanical engineering.

“Do you need anything, Hatim?” I asked.

He closed the book in his lap with his finger bookmarking the page. “A car, for starters. If I have to drive over an hour to university every day to take my finals, that’s a good place to start.”

“Watch your tone, ya walad,” Ahmad said.

Hatim glared back but said nothing. I pulled down the visor and adjusted my hijab in the small mirror, giving a reassuring look to my son when his eyes flicked my way. We both knew that when Ahmad was in a foul mood there would be no talking about anything, but I knew my husband would come around. If he didn’t, I had no qualms giving Hatim my own car, which Ahmad’s friend followed in behind us.

Ahmad’s brother Saeed and his wife Suad greeted us at the brass double doors that crisscrossed over a thick, granulated plate of glass. Though Suad was much younger than him, the shadows on her face aged her decades. The emerald pendant that once embellished a rosy, full bust now drooped on a shell of wiry neck and collarbones. Strands of hair that escaped a loose ponytail streaked her face.

“You’ve lost weight,” she told me as we broke away from the brothers’ reunion.

“I could tell you the same.” Laith toddled behind me and Hatim greeted Suad’s son Farouk. “Where is Tala?”

“She’s around.”

“And Nedda? Has Saeed found her?” The last I heard of her was that she’d been arrested and nobody knew where she was being held including her father who was in the military.

“Nothing yet. Keep her in your prayers.” Suad fiddled with her small wrists. “Would you like some coffee? Tea?”

“Coffee is fine.” I followed her into the kitchen. Huda sat on one of the kitchen stools that lined the table under the window, talking quietly on the phone.

“Teita!” Laith ran over and hugged her. She wrapped an arm around him and smiled at me before turning away, covering her mouth as she continued. I waved Laith over.

“Is everything okay?” I asked Suad.

She shrugged. “Sounds like business.” She boiled a small pot of water on the stove and added a few spoonfuls of ground coffee beans with cardamom. The smell of the coffee already wiped the tired from me.

Huda ended the call and placed her hand on my shoulder. “I’m so glad you made it out. Especially with this little one.” She pinched his cheek. “Is Hatim here, too?”

“Yes. He’s with Farouk.”

“Good. Saeed wants to talk to him.” I smiled though my stomach churned. Suad was lovely, but I never liked Saeed. Laith said he looked like that giant rooster from *Looney Tunes*. I didn’t disagree. My brother-in-law was a heavysset man with a caterpillar moustache and hair spiked backwards with so much gel it looked stiff enough to cut someone. He was the only member of the family (aside from Nabil, whom no one talked about) who wasn’t in the apricot business, choosing instead to climb military ranks. With the violently escalating conflict, I didn’t need to wonder what he wanted to talk to my son about.

I didn’t have to wait long. A few hours later, around a spread of rice-stuffed grape leaves, kibbeh in yogurt sauce, kabseh, fattoush, and a dozen small plates, Saeed cleared his throat, silencing the entire table. Even Laith set his silverware down and listened. Only the grandfather clock’s ticking kept the silence at bay.

“I was on patrol a few days ago.” Saeed took his time sipping from his glass of ayran. “I oversaw some new units coming to Damascus to protect people from the riots. Do you know what I noticed?” He paused. His eyes fixed on my son. “Hardly any youth. Where did the young men run off to, hm? Are they hiding behind their mothers, behind their schoolbooks? Farouk here wants to be a doctor. What’s that degree in ‘virology’ going to do if there’s a different

kind of virus stirring in our country? The medicine of this country is the army. Your own needs and desires for security come second to those of your country. Right, Farouk?” His gaze lingered on his son, who appeared to nod only out of obligation. Farouk seemed more interested in coating his fattoush in leftover yogurt sauce than having any part in this conversation.

“You make a good point, akhi,” Ahmad said, staring at my son like a street cat daring its prey to move. “Isn’t that right, Hatim?”

The silence that followed was so thick I could practically feel static ringing the silverware.

Hatim set down his fork. Its clang against the plate’s rim echoed in my ears, and I tensed thinking, *don’t say anything stupid, ya walad*. “With all due respect, Amu, Baba,” he nodded at them in turn, “some youth are not interested in wielding weapons.”

“Interest?” Saeed’s chest inflated like Ahmad’s did when he’s about to burst. “No one said anything about interest. Obligation. You should know better than to think like that. Maybe your mother should have raised you better.”

Saeed acted like I wasn’t at the table, so I stared at my husband. He ignored me, too, staying silent. He even smiled. Did he know I was watching? I felt that tightness return, the feeling that walls of the room were going to close in on me. I thought I’d run away from that. Suad held my wrist under the table and it gave me strength. My son has more character than the two of you, I wanted to say, but Hatim spoke before I could.

“I’m grateful that I was raised to follow the things I love.” He snorted, his eyes seemed to gleam like sunlight on water. “Isn’t that what you did, Amu? Leaving the family business to go into the military?”



Suad stifled a laugh, the first I'd heard from her. Now I knew where the sparkle in her daughter's eyes came from. I held my glass of ayran to my lips to hide my smile.

The corners of Saeed's mouth twitched. The room seemed to freeze in time and even the grandfather clock didn't seem to tick. "I only want what's best for you, nephew."

"Like you wanted what's best for Amu Nabil, right?"

"Hatim," I snapped. "That's enough."

What followed my outburst was silence as everyone looked between my son and Saeed.

"Oooh my god," Tala said. I'd forgotten she was on the table with us, and I was glad she was there to fill the quiet. Ahmad's brother Nabil was exiled in the 80's. No one talked about him anymore.

"Who wants more kabseh?" Huda said with too much enthusiasm. "Habibi Laith, your plate is empty."

"I'm not hungry," Laith said.

Hatim's chair whined as he stood, picking up his plate and glass. "I'm not, either. Thanks for the wonderful meal, Teita Huda." Without another word, he disappeared into the kitchen.

I avoided Ahmad as we cleared the table. I could feel him staring at me as I went from the kitchen to the dining table to stack plates and bring in all serving dishes. My shoulders curled with the thought that Ahmad would take it out on me.

"He hurts you sometimes, doesn't he?" Suad said.

My heart lost its rhythm for a moment. I didn't feel her come up behind me. "Why would you say that?"

“Brothers are cut from the same cloth.” She ran her hand over my hijab and searched my eyes. “Sometimes I wish sisters-in-law were, too.” Then she hugged me. Her thin waist was smaller than it looked.

“It will get better. We just need to be patient and have heart.”

“I wish I had your faith, Rula.” She lowered her voice more. “He’s going to make Farouk enlist. The only thing keeping him from doing that is my request for him to watch over Tala. Once she graduates, there’s nothing keeping Saeed from taking my boy away.”

I heard Huda’s footsteps and wiped Suad’s cheeks. “We’re wives of the Shakfehs. If Huda taught us anything, it’s that time and patience can make you the most powerful woman in Damascus.” I needed to hear it as much as she did.

Suad sniffed and smiled. Huda entered, carrying a massive tray of apricot jam. “Those dishes aren’t going to wash themselves, ladies.”

**Step Five: Place under direct heat and sunlight until a thick consistency develops. Apricot halves will be visible but not prominent.**

Weeks later, I watched Hatim roll up to the villa in my Mercedes from my window, the car lurching to a halt even as he jumped out. “Mama. Mama Rula!” He called, his voice echoing up the spiral staircase.

“I’m in my room,” I called back, moving quickly to find a hijab to greet him downstairs. Before I could fling the cloth around my neck, he was knocking at my door.

“Look!” He rushed in and shoved an envelope in my hands. I hadn’t seen him this excited in a long time.

The seal of the university stared up at me. Heat prickled my skin, and I let the hijab slide down to my shoulders. “Are these your scores?” I opened the letter, saw my son’s nearly perfect marks, then stared up at his beaming face. My eyes watered. “Mabrook, my little engineer.” I wrapped him in a hug, and he buried me in his. Fear wormed its way through my joy, and I knew Hatim could feel it, too.

“They can’t conscript me if I’m working, right?” he whispered.

“That’s what they say.” I wanted to believe it. “Do you have prospects?”

He pulled away and nodded. “There’s a residential project in Dumar. Another in Kafar Souseh.”

“Good. Keep your options open.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He kissed my forehead and walked out. Before he left, he poked his head in again. “I’m going to be an engineer!”

I laughed then turned back to my dresser. The bags under my eyes had darkened in the past month. Suad noticed and gave me an orange product to make them disappear under my foundation. The revolution was creeping up the mountain toward us. The groundskeeper’s wife could be heard wailing one night. Her whole family was shot and killed in Homs by government militia. I wondered what kind of soldier would shoot families in their homes. At what point does battle extinguish the light from a person’s soul? I didn’t want my son to become a monster.

As the weather began to crisp, the groundskeeper hand-delivered a letter to me. It was addressed to Hatim from the military.

I woke with Suad fanning my face with a placemat. “Where’s my son?” I asked.

“Packing.”

“Where’s the letter?”

“He said you were going to ask for it.” She pulled it out of her back pocket and handed it to me. “There’s good news. Look where he’s stationed.”

I sat up and skimmed the letter, blinking through the water that welled up. “Zabadani?” I shut my eyes. “Thank God.”

“Ten minutes away is a blessing. No doubt Saeed pulled some strings.”

I folded the letter. “No doubt this is all his doing. My son was working on a project in Dumar. Why would they pull him out of his job? That’s against the law.”

Suad held my hands. “Desperate times.”

When I found more composure, I went to see Hatim. Music blasted from his room. At my knock, the music stopped. Hatim opened the door and let me in. His eyes were red-rimmed. “Are you all right?”

He shrugged. “It’s war, Mama. None of us are all right.” He went back to his closet and threw more clothes in his bag. “At least I’ll be doing something to keep people safe. Or maybe we could end it. I want life to go back to normal.”

“I know.” I thought of the groundskeeper’s family and rubbed my arms.

Saeed picked up Hatim a few days later. I was still asleep, but he left me a note on my dresser. Neither of us was ever really good at goodbyes. Though Ahmad said he was fine, his temper went sour and curdled.

To avoid his foul moods, I spent most of my time in the kitchen with my mother-in-law, stirring halved apricots with sugar in a massive pot over the stove. My arms burned with every stir. The sugar was brittle and sloshed around, coating the apricots. The tangy sweetness made me want to gag. “Be grateful,” Huda said. Once the sugar dissolved, we could transfer the

contents into a tray and let the sun finish the rest of the heating in the final warm days of the season.

As we sealed up the last batch of jam in jars, Huda brought over some pita bread and unsalted butter. “Let’s enjoy the fruits of our labor.” We split a loaf and generously spread butter and jam. “Put some more apricot halves on yours,” she said.

I smiled, grabbed a fork, and snagged the smooth syrupy chunks from the jar.

“You know, Rula,” Huda said between bites, “the apricot pieces make our jam a novelty. The sugar thickens the apricot’s juice into a syrup, but the apricot itself holds on to its form. It gets tangier even though the elements, the sugar and the heat, urge it to sweeten. These stubborn apricots make it so the jam is not just a sweeter, stickier apricot. It turns it into something new.”

Without sufficient warmth outside to make more jam, we sat around the television, cooked, and went shopping in Zabadani. Shops and trolleys twinkled with fairy lights. While many people of the town didn’t celebrate Christmas, the whole world seemed to celebrate, bringing warmth to the bitter season.

Suad and I did not talk much, our sons on our minds. With every passing day, she would retreat more and more into her bedroom. She started screaming in the middle of the night. Then, in the middle of the day. Tala came by and would often help her recover from her fits. Saeed thought it best if they moved back to Damascus where it was warmer. They owned an apartment in a nice suburb near the city center.

I didn’t see much of Saeed or Suad after that. Huda and I spent time around the fireplace. We talked and bonded in ways I wished my mother had time for. Mama was too preoccupied with working double-time while my mother-in-law labored only out of love. If she ever decided to stop working, someone would jump in and pick up the slack.

Ahmad's father passed on New Year's Eve. In his will, he signed the farm off to Ahmad, the villa in Madaya to Huda. With my father-in-law gone, Ahmad became unbearable. Once, I put a humble breakfast spread on his nightstand with a fake flower I pulled out of a bouquet in the living room. When he woke up, he knocked the whole table over because I forgot to put a glass of water to go with his food.

Hatim sent me occasional texts. The most recent one was that he'd finished training and officially joined a unit in Zabadani to stifle recent rebel activity in the area. Two weeks later, soldiers arrived with a body bag. They said they were sorry for my loss. My knees slammed against the marble. I heard a rush of footsteps. A wail pierced the air. My throat was scratched and raw. Huda helped me up. Ahmad thanked the officers and helped them bring the body inside. My son. My little engineer.

Huda made calls. Funeral homes. Family. Friends. I drifted toward the long coffee table in front of the couch where they had placed him. I unzipped the bag, stared at my baby's face. I put my forehead to his.

Ahmad came out of the bathroom, swiping the bridge of his nose. "I don't remember the last thing I said to him," he whispered.

"Come here," I said, offering him my hand. He took it, and I tugged him to sit on the floor next to me. For the first time in a long time, we huddled in each other's arms. Our tears tried to bring warmth back into those pale cheeks.

**Note: Syrup should form and apricots will develop a pebble-like appearance. If time and heat do not yield to the appropriate consistency, batch is unsuitable for consumption.**

**Dispose.**

After the funeral, we sat around a wordless dinner. Over Ahmad's shoulder, I watched ash fall like snow outside the window. Four gardens had been burning since the night before. The fighting continued a few blocks down the road. Gunshots never ceased, even at night.

"I think I'm going visit my family for a couple days," I announced, surprising myself.

Without looking at me, Ahmad shook his head. "Too dangerous. Your parents live in a small village."

"So what? Living here isn't much safer." As if to punctuate my point, a grenade exploded a couple miles away. "Besides, Laith misses his other grandmother."

"I won't allow it," Ahmad said.

"It's a difficult time for all of us," Huda said, clearing her throat. "I think it's a good idea for Rula to be with her family."

He grumbled but said nothing.

"Pack up and go for a couple days. It'll be fine." She nodded.

I was to head out the next day. That morning, I served Arabic coffee in cups we reserved for special guests. I thought it would be a nice gesture, since Ahmad and I had picked out that set together as a gift for his mother.

Ahmad sat in front of the television, finger pressed against the remote, flipping through stations faster than the time it took to register them. I handed him a saucer with a small cup. "I brought you coffee."

He grabbed the cup from my hand and took a sip. His face twisted and before I knew what had happened, my face was on fire. Black slime clung to my cheeks and burned through my skin. I screamed and rubbed it off with my sleeves. My eyes stung, burned, and watered.

I heard Huda's footsteps, her voice booming for him to leave the room. I heard a slap and impatient feet shuffling away, then two cool hands on my face. I couldn't see past the water that refracted light like I was submerged in my head.

Huda led me to a sink and forced my eyes open under a running faucet. The cool water on my cheeks helped me calm down. Few minutes later, she handed me a damp towel, and I dabbed my face and eyes.

She guided me to a chair and sat in front of me. She took hold of my hands. "I called Farouk. He'll be here soon to make sure you're okay."

"Thank you."

She was quiet for some time. I opened my eyes and found I could see despite the stinging. "I don't think I can take this anymore," I said quietly. "I thought things were going to be different but—"

"Then don't," she said. I stared at her. Had I heard that right? "You think I don't know how he treats you? Maybe you need some time apart."

"If I leave him, I'll have nothing. I can't go back home—"

"Go to the villa. Start your own business."

"I can't just..." Starting up a business out of the blue? I imagined myself running the business, charting efficient travel routes, meeting with executives. Was it even legal? "Can I? Is it even safe?"



“The landlord said the soldiers have moved their base. Look, we’re a few months away from the next harvest. If you plan accordingly, it’ll be yours by summertime.”

“What will you get out of this?” I studied her face, watched her face change from calculating to pained and back again.

“Let me co-own the farm. Let the women take over the family business instead of working in the basement on jams and jams. I’ve had enough.” It wasn’t a bad deal. It made me wonder what kind of a life she had with my father-in-law. Maybe we were more alike than I thought.

Grief took a backseat as Huda and I worked on a contract, one a judge couldn’t turn away. Ahmad was incompetent to run the business. A smooth transition of ownership. A contract where everyone but Ahmad could keep their jobs, there would be less paperwork for the court to ask for, and it meant the odds were in our favor. Besides, I had sustained second-degree burns on my face and eyes. My left eyelid was swollen shut. A man with a temper like that couldn’t be fit to run a family business. Having someone like that lead the company was bad for the image.

I told him I needed time alone. Went to the villa with Laith. Within a month, we had a restraining order on Ahmad. He wasn’t allowed on the farm. Huda graciously invited Ahmad to stay at the villa in Zabadani, but he didn’t take the offer. While that worried me, I knew if he stepped foot on the farm again, he would be detained immediately. We let him come by and pick up his things. I stayed out of his way as he collected his belongings, keeping Laith close. As he shuffled out with two large suitcases, he stopped a few steps away.

“How could you do this to me?” His eyes displayed none of the light I remembered, but his earthy smell tried to pull me in, spinning me until I laughed, melting my muscles into his, holding me while I cried.

“I loved you,” I said. “Maybe with time, I can love you again.”

He shouldered past me and out the door. My breaths came easier. Huda wrapped her arms around me. For a time, I believed what I told him, but distance made the heart grow colder. With no kindle to light the fire, quick to burn out. His void was filled with running the business and spending time with Huda. We would still make the five-step delicacy, but only when we wanted.

*Damascus, 2012*

## **THE BATTLE OF ZABADANI**

Shots echoed off the walls of the empty city on the eleventh day of battle. The occasional sound of shattering glass shred through the shouts and cries of men. Diyaa shuffled back, fingers skimming snow, until his back hit a browning brick wall. The Armed Forces soldier aimed his assault rifle. Diyaa's own rifle sat useless several feet away. He closed the eye that wasn't swollen shut by the earlier beating with the rifle's end and said the shahada, his final proclamation of faith. Looking up at the soldier, the color drained from his face.

“Hatim?”

#

Talk to any Syrian twelfth grader, and they'll tell you what hell looks like. Hell is projectile-spitting, onion-smelling teachers with olive oil smudges on their oversized spectacles. Hell is taking a comprehensive final exam to determine your career. Hell is knowing dreams of becoming an engineer can be ripped from you if you don't score high enough.

Diyaa and Hatim met in physics and later commiserated in the library. With teamwork and many late nights studying together, they both earned high marks on their exams, permitting them to pursue degrees in engineering.

#

They were conscripted into yearlong military training at different camps. Then later at Damascus University, Diyaa studied mechanical engineering and had classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Hatim studied electrical engineering and had classes on Mondays and Wednesdays. On Fridays, Diyaa went to the Amawi mosque for the Friday sermon. Hatim went to the Iman mosque for the Friday sermon. Too many canceled hangouts, and they lost touch altogether.

#

Diyaa spent summer weekends with family in Bloudan in an apartment on a mountain just northwest of Damascus, barbecuing lamb kebabs on a small grill on the balcony. Down below, his younger cousins climbed peach trees in Abu Imad's garden. They returned with sticky orange beards and dirt-lined fingernails.

Hatim and his family spent weekends in Zabadani, the city lights a carnival as bright as Damascus. He cruised in his Mercedes, driving up to the family villa in Madaya. Music blasted from cars and shops. Street vendors flaunted handmade trinkets and goods imported from all corners of the world.

#

War was a whisper in the wind. Far, far away. A birdsong in Hama. A red river in Homs. *Jaish el-Hur*. Hush, not in front of the children.

#

When war came to Diyaa, doors busted in and men with guns took his uncle. Diyaa sped to the apartment at the sight of smoke, his car slipping on icy roads. Flames consumed barren peach trees. Upstairs, he was greeted by sobbing children and an aunt with glazed eyes and ripped clothes lying on the couch, barely breathing. Shots rung out. With smoke as his cover, he ran. Past Abu Imad with a trail of blood on his forehead. Past his car with the slashed tires. An old, white Suzuki truck offered him a ride out of the city to Zabadani. Diyaa hopped in and picked up his phone, calling for an ambulance.

War came to Hatim in the mail. Military recruitment. His mother was relieved to hear he would be stationed near Zabadani, but still stayed up all night praying for his safety. At the base, Hatim fell in with the others and quickly heard rumors of the rebels' plans to seize the city. They

couldn't have rebels riling up the people, making them feel unsafe. They needed to protect the people.

#

A friend Diyaa hadn't heard from in years contacted him for coffee. Niceties led into safety talk led into war talk.

"You're *Jaish el-Hur*?" Diyaa asked.

"People are protesting here. There are a lot of us. At least a dozen civilians have died by the hands of the Armed Forces. We're going to take Zabadani and protect our families."

Hatim learned to assemble his rifle with the other soldiers. The mechanics were flawless, parts fitting together seamlessly. His hands worked to convince himself that he was building, not reassembling. Engineer, not soldier. There were only so many times he could before his mind refused to be tricked.

#

Talk to any Syrian, and they'll tell you what hell looks like.

#

"Diyaa?" Hatim lowered his weapon slightly.

Diyaa sat up a little straighter against the browning wall, his fingers numb against the snow. "We need change, Hatim. Don't you see?"

"Syria was fine," Hatim said. "We were safe. Secure."

"Controlled. It's a republic without freedom."

"A price we pay for safety."

"It doesn't have to be."

Hatim shivered. "I don't want to hurt you."

Diyaa stood. “Put the gun down.”

Gunshots and ricochets pelted the silence. One of the sides called to fall back. Something changed in Hatim’s face, and then a bullet struck his skull. His blood sprayed the snow.

*Aleppo, 2014*

## **HELMETS**

Heat radiated off the jammed windows of the van and washed over Farouk's sunburnt face. Sweat pooled at his brow where a band strapped his white helmet firmly to his head. The seven men, including him, were silent. In front of him, Hamza's helmet, with its infamous dent in the back where the words "Civil Defense" resided, bobbed with the movements of the van on uneven gravel. As if the iconic headpiece would be unrecognizable on the half dozen men, as if the locals would expect anyone else.

They turned down a bottlenecked alley that opened into a residential plaza. Even with the raging smoke, the buildings impacted by the latest airstrike were hard to miss. From the looks of it, a barrel bomb had struck between two residential buildings, causing them to collapse into each other like two Jenga towers, a single heaping mound of crumbling concrete slabs and compromised platforms. Flames coughing smoke gushed out of several windows, struggling for air.

As Farouk clambered out of the van, he handed a letter to the driver.

"For your sister?" the driver asked.

"Who else?" Farouk said.

"It's been three years, akhi. Hope is good, but this kind might kill you."

He clasped the driver's shoulder. "Just take it."

Farouk caught up with the rest of the team, who had gathered around Waleed, a former construction worker. He pointed out places to avoid digging into.

"Yalla, shabab. Let's go," Waleed said. The van's engine revved behind them. Farouk looked back and watched it zoom away, kicking up dust as it turned the corner.

#

*August 5, 2011*

*Damascus*

*My Beloved Sister,*

*I hope one day when you're safe, you'll find these letters tucked away in Mama's wardrobe. Tala said she would keep them safe for you among Mama's journals. I convinced her not to pack Mama's things yet, that you still wanted to do it. Baba's working on getting you out, by the way, but his influence is waning.*

*When I saw the soldier rip you away from the car, I didn't know what to do. I didn't have to decide. They took me, too. They said they'd kill you if I didn't cooperate.*

*Here's the crazy thing, Nedda. I didn't mind. I know you'll hold it over my head. You're going to feel guilty thinking that I'm only doing this to keep you safe. Stop that. It feels good to do something. I'm finally doing something to bring peace back to Syria. I know you wouldn't approve. I know you'd prefer me joining the FSA, but this is the situation. I don't have much of a choice.*

*It's not as bad as I thought it would be. When we roll into towns, the people seem to appreciate us being there. The kids love trying on our green helmets. They thank us for protecting them from the rebels. I know you hate that word, too. But isn't that what they are? Our government was doing fine. If anything, we were safe. I know what we had wasn't ideal, but what country is? Maybe there were other ways the people could have asked for change.*

*Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I'm doing fine. I'm protecting others. I'm saving lives, and that's all that matters. I hope to see you in good health and peace.*

*Your Brother,*



*Farouk*

#

Farouk was relieved that the flames did not last. The dust and still-crumbling structure suffocated them into nonexistence. He adjusted his pack and followed the crew who had begun to clear away the rubble with flat-edged spades, some with larger shovels. It would be a couple hours before they could get an excavator truck to move the rubble and dust, enough time for them to dig and make sure there were no people trapped beneath. As they worked, more people emerged from the building, tripping, holding children. Other members of the team led them away.

“There’s someone here,” Waleed called.

Between concrete and stone, a hand trembled, autumn-brown and covered in pasty-white dust. Farouk dropped his shovel and dug into rubble with gloved hands. A couple teammates joined in, others using the flat end of their shovels to push the dirt out of the way until he brushed a smooth surface. “There’s something here.” A piece of concrete about ten square feet pinned the body down, shoulder and head.

“Ya Allah,” Farouk whispered.

“He’s moving, that’s a good sign,” another reassured. “Yasser, get ready.”

“Already on it,” Yasser said. Farouk watched as he unrolled a tarp a few feet away and pulled out a surgical kit.

“Farouk, are you with us?” Waleed said.

“What are we going to do?”

“We have to dig around the concrete and see how thick it is. Maybe we can dig him out from under instead of breaking the slab.”

Farouk nodded, grabbing his shovel.

#

*December 18, 2011*

*Homs*

*Beloved Nedda,*

*Sometimes I feel you're here with me. I hear your voice in my head, pointing out scenery that would make nice paintings. Other times you tell me when I'm about to do something stupid, with that crazy laugh of yours and a smack. You always smacked me.*

*I still remember that time we were playing Uno and eating roasted watermelon seeds. You hated that I just sucked away at the salt-caked shell and didn't open them. I still think it's better that way. You can keep your tasteless seeds. Anyway, I remember you took a break on your phone, and I lined up seeds in my mouth. When you looked up, I flashed you this great black smile and you were so startled you dropped your cards. I laughed a little, but I remember you couldn't stop. You were holding your belly and rolling on the ground. Your laughter is so contagious. We both had tears in our eyes by the end of it.*

*I miss you, Nedda. I think you were right about the Armed Forces. Today, they sent us to a town that had rebel groups, but we didn't see any. Turns out, it was just a group of able men who had not enlisted, and they wanted us to "stop them." From what? I don't know. My unit arrested so many, and killed the ones that tried to escape. Civilians. I didn't know we were advocating guilty until proven innocent. Is that how war works?*

*I hope you're well, sister. You're in my prayers.*

*Your Brother,*

*Farouk*

#

A shiber, maybe a shiber and a half. That was how thick Farouk measured the slab to be. Instead of digging around, they dug deep in one place, careful not to get their tools too close to the boy. He didn't see how something like this could have fallen on him and he was still living. God's miracle, or, as his father would say, it simply wasn't his time to die.

The more they dug, the more it became clearer the boy wasn't pinned directly underneath. Earth loosened and crumbled away, falling deep. There was a house underneath.

It was not uncommon that apartments were built on top of old, thick-stoned houses. Small, one-story structures made from layered bricks and rock were often a hassle to demolish. And so foundations were built around them. The boy was pinned at the waist, but his head was hanging freely below. Miracle baby.

#

*March 14, 2012*

*Nedda,*

*I ran away. I'm so, so sorry. I'm praying they won't hurt you because they wouldn't do that to Baba. I'm hoping they forgot about me. About you.*

*I can imagine you boasting how you were right, and I was wrong. I'll give it to you. I saw something awful. I couldn't believe it. We were told to bring two men in for questioning. When we got there, all we saw were two young boys, maybe eight years old. I couldn't believe my eyes. You know what their crime was? They wrote "freedom" in chalk on the sidewalk just outside of the school. They were kids! Babies. I told my superior, and he shrugged and arrested them anyway.*

*Allah wakeelik, these boys were crying the entire way. Sobbing. One of them had a stain between his legs. When we got back to the base, we locked them in an interrogation room and left them there for days. No food, water, nowhere to relieve themselves. I couldn't help because I didn't have a key. Almost three days later, he lets them out. They were pale, tear-stained, and smelled awful. Someone had paid a lot of money for their release. I volunteered to take them home. No one fought me on it because they didn't want their cars to smell, too. I dropped them off and wished them well. They looked at me like I was a monster. I felt like one.*

*Instead of turning back to camp, I drove away. I can't say where in case they intercept this letter.*

*Be safe, Nedda.*

*Farouk*

#

Farouk and Waleed, now strapped into harnesses, were lowered on lifelines down the newly-drilled hole. Waleed flicked on his flashlight and shined it around the slab that roofed the building. Sunlight beamed through the areas they had dug around, creating a soft halo above. On the far side of the underground house, the little boy hung from between the cracks, his dark blond flop of hair powdered so white, he looked like an apparition.

“See that area over there?” Farouk pointed to where slab ended and earth begun. “What if we dug directly around him in that area and pulled him out horizontally?”

Waleed shook his head. “Some of that dirt is keeping the pressure off him. Look—” He pointed to the other side, where the slab was upraised by hard packed earth. The boy was pinned underneath, but it was a relief to see he wasn't holding the slab up. Pulling him out wouldn't

cause the block to collapse or fall away, but that also meant it wasn't crushing him. At least they hoped.

"What about finding a way to push it up from down here?"

He held up his finger. "No, no...sh. Let me think."

Farouk walked closer to the boy, hoping the angle change would give him perspective. He couldn't picture how the boy ended up like this. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe the barrel hit the ground, causing the floor to rise just as the boy rolled under?

"We could run cords around the slab through strategic areas, and then lift the whole thing upwards," Waleed thought aloud. "If we can get that crane here in time. What's the status on clearing the roads?"

"Not good. The bombs broke a lot of the roadways. Still need a few hours to be able to maneuver around."

Waleed sighed. "It's our safest option to wait."

"Can't we do anything from down here? Maybe break through the foundation?"

"You're new at this, akhi. There's not much we can do for him at this point, even if we get him out." Waleed walked over and shined a light on where the boy's torso lumped at an awkward angle from between the cracks. "When we lift that slab, his lungs are going to collapse. Internal bleeding is going to spread. He'll die before we reach the hospital. Yasser will tell you the same. *That's* the reality. We need to try and save everyone, but some are too far gone." He tugged on his lifeline, and he walked back to the hole they'd drilled. "There are others that need our help who have a chance at surviving. I'm going to check on the other units."

"I'm going to stay and see if we have other options. Tell Hamza to come down here when he has a minute."

Waleed nodded. “All right, I’ll make sure Doctor Yasser stays around in case you come up with something. Watch that area I told you about. The whole thing might fall if the sand crumbles.”

#

*December 1, 2012*

*Aleppo*

*Beloved Sister,*

*It’s been so long since I’ve written to you. I fled to Turkey for a while and waited for news about my disappearance. None, yet. I ran into a few men who were working for the FSA. Medics. It took them a while to trust me, and I will blame Baba for that. I reminded them who our uncle was. It meant nothing, but they hesitated enough to at least let me help them.*

*I’ve been assisting the doctors, handing them supplies, comforting patients. I feel useful. One time they let me on the field to help move wounded soldiers to safety. I wore a green band around my head. In the field, I used it to tie a tourniquet. I didn’t consider these brave men to be rebels, at least not rebels in the negative sense. They were protecting their families. Our country, it’s not the same. It feels like someone tore through the skin and revealed a disgusting monster underneath. Was Syria always like this in the heads of those who lead us? In their eyes, were we always at war? If a lion circles a herd of deer without harming them, does that mean he likes them, that he respects them? Or is he just waiting for the right time to strike?*

*Two children died in my arms today. Nothing feels right. My hands always have blood on them.*

*Stay safe.*

*Farouk*

#

As Waleed disappeared to the surface, Farouk studied the deathtrap. The boy, stuck between a cracked floor slab and the wall of the old home. The earth to his left, packed and keeping the block upraised. Farouk studied the wall keeping him from falling through. If he had rolled a few seconds sooner would he be completely inside instead of stuck as he was? It wasn't good to think about what-ifs.

What if they broke the old wall? Was that too simple? How could Waleed oversee that possibility? The wall wasn't holding anything up, at least not the slab pinning the child. If he broke through some of the bricks, could he bring the boy down and back up through the hole they'd drilled?

"You down here, Farouk?" Hamza called from the surface.

"Yeah. Pull me up." Farouk shielded his eyes as the sun glared back at him. He blinked until Hamza's ash-sprinkled beard and soot-smudged face came into focus.

"Please tell me you have an idea."

He nodded. "I need your help."

Together they descended into the hole. Farouk explained how they should cut away the bricks of the old wall and bring the boy down, Hamza said he was crazy, and then he had Yasser lower a ladder and an angle grinder. Farouk climbed the ladder and began cutting the mortar away from two bricks down. "We're going to need a litter harness, quick."

As the bricks came loose, he gently pulled them away and tossed them to the side. The grinder was passed to Hamza and he pulled the boy down. Meanwhile, Yasser lowered the harness and Hamza lifted it to make it easier on Farouk to get him safely down. Yasser, with tools ready, had begun operations the minute the boy was on the surface, out of the darkness. At

least boy would not see the blinding light yet. His eyes hardly fluttered under their lids, his ribcage was at an odd angle, but he was breathing. He was alive.

Farouk sat next to him, held his hand, whispered an apology he hoped little boys, doves in heaven, would hear.

#

*February 22, 2013*

*Aleppo*

*Beloved Nedda,*

*I'm somewhere in Aleppo now. I joined the Syrian Civil Defense. Can you believe that? The rescue missions I've been a part of have been overwhelming. We lose people every day, but it is nothing like I would have ever imagined. Finally, a job I have that you'd approve of. I know if you were around, you'd want to join me. There aren't any women on my team, but they are looking to create another female unit here in Aleppo. You'd appreciate that.*

*I'm still learning. The men here have been at it for years. Just the other day, I saved a young woman. As I carried her out, she grabbed my helmet and said, "The only helmets this country can trust are the white ones." I've never felt prouder to join them. Although I'm no longer on the run, I am still running. Is there anywhere in Syria where someone isn't? Only, this time, I'm running toward the bombs this time. I'm running, and I can't seem to stop.*

*Farouk*



*Damascus, 2013*

## **NOTHING BUT NAWAR**

The farmlands were more barren than Rula remembered. She had hoped to rely on them for cover. When did the trees become so thin?

“Mama, Amu Saeed is still behind us,” Laith whined in her ear. His arms on her neck tightened.

“I know, habibi,” she said, adjusting his weight on her back. She picked up her pace. The engine behind them growled. Headlights illuminated the trees around her as the jeep maneuvered around the last bundle of woods she had bolted through. She’d gained some ground after passing through the dense tree line, but now that she was back in the open, dried roots of the barren fields tangling in her toes, it wouldn’t be long before he would catch up. There was another tree line up ahead and she ran for it, hoping that past them resided some taller stalks of crop to hide within. Instead, the headlights reflected a metal link fence, and beyond it, flashing lights. For the first time since her mad dash, she felt hope. “Hang on tight, mashee?”

At that moment she was grateful she had run barefoot. She climbed with fingers and toes. The fence wasn’t high, maybe six feet. An old, smudged sign read HAPPY LAND ENTRANCE with a red arrow pointing left. She put her foot on the sign to help get over the edge. She jumped from the fence, stumbling into a steady run. Once she was out of sight of the fence and hidden in the shadows of a building, she slowed to catch her breath. Laith slid off her back. Around them, the silent amusement park loomed.

It had been a while since she had been here. She’d heard Happy Land had become a hub for lowlifes in the years leading up to the war, but even before then, it was not well maintained. The last time she was there on a family trip, she burned her elbow on the go-karts. The exposed

engine sat directly behind the driver's seat and as she turned to laugh at a cousin falling behind, her elbow seared against it. Rula's relatives yelled at the manager of the ride, and all he did was tell his associate to bring over some topical burn cream. She'd heard the park closed a couple years ago. Three years into the war and there probably wasn't any business. The owner probably left the country.

"I thought we were going to the airport," Laith said.

"We will. We need your uncle to stop following us first." She listened for the sound of an engine, then more closely for footsteps. They were alone.

"Is this Happy Land?"

"It is."

"You told baba this place was full of nawar."

She frowned. "Don't use that word."

"Are we safe?"

"I don't know."

#

The weather was unusually cool for a summer's night. Baana hummed Nancy Ajram's "Aah w Noss" while swinging on a red and white striped hammock made of canvas tent. Around her, smaller tents—propped up by furniture legs or lap bars she'd unscrewed from ride carts—housed supplies she'd hoarded in the past six months. It was difficult at first, fighting over supplies with the other park dwellers, and this place wasn't hospitable. Between the dogs and the falling rides, the occasional stray rocket and passing tank, the cold winter nights and dirty rain, there weren't many people left...but she'd told herself she wouldn't complain. Although supplies were starting to run low, at least they were only hers. The other dwellers kept to themselves. She

knew one man who cooped up in the park's motel. Another claimed the haunted mansion ride at the back of the park next to the food storage units.

It could have been worse; at some point some FSA soldiers had dropped in to spy on a checkpoint the Armed Forces had set up along the road to the airport. During their stay, they tinkered with some wiring and got some lights on. Not anything too bright, just enough to make nights bearable. They also brought supplies, rations, uniform...a lot of which she now had since the soldiers left one day and didn't come back. Sometimes she wished they'd left a gun.

#

As they walked deeper into the park, Rula pulled Laith close. Most of Happy Land was in shambles. The stray lights still flickering revealed detached ride carts and mangled fences. In the center of the park, metal parts lay in a heap, groaning like a wounded animal when aggravated by the wind. It took her a moment to recognize it as the Ferris wheel that once had been a beacon of joys when driving down the dark airport highway. She scanned the skies for the other monument, the scissors ride—two colossal vehicles that swung in opposite directions until they met upside down like scissor blades, hundreds of feet in the air. There. It still towered over all, engulfed in darkness even the moon could not silhouette, oppressing a section of the park in shadows.

“Let's find somewhere to sleep,” she whispered.

Rula thought better than to head east towards the resort hotel for the night. It seemed like the first place he would come looking for her. Instead, she headed in the opposite direction, further into the park. She took out her phone to use the flashlight, but paused upon seeing the aggressively flashing battery symbol on her Nokia's screen. Walking under the shadow of the scissors ride with the moon obscured behind it, only stray lights lit her path. If they were jerry-

rigged, then nawar must be living here. Maybe losing Saeed in this hellish place put her in more danger. Still, she trudged on.

A dog barked and she froze. There were wild dogs in the area, but she never thought they'd make it past the fence or main gate. Laith hugged her hip. Rula picked him up and he climbed onto her back. She ran but soon heard soft padding feet and panting following behind. The barking grew louder, angrier. She could almost feel its breath on her legs. It growled.

Up ahead, a chalet-style building off to the right caught her eye. Two flickering bulbs barely emanated enough light to shine on two round tables nailed to the patio on either side of the door, surrounded by upturned, splintered chairs. She tried the door but it was locked. She turned. The dog was almost as big as Laith. In the minimal light, its dark fur seemed to glisten. It bared its teeth. She eyed the window; its sliding door was cracked open. She tried to move, but the dog barked a warning. Rula took a breath and scrambled backwards to the window, pushing the window aside before dropping Laith through. As she threw herself in, small daggers tore through her calf. She screamed and Laith screamed with her. The dog pulled back. Rula cried and struck its head with her arm, and then slammed the window on his snout repeatedly until, with a whimper, it unhooked itself from her flesh.

She slammed the window shut and crumpled inside.

"Mama!" Laith was at her side, crying.

"It's fine, habibi. Don't look at my leg. Look at my face." She held back a groan and closed her eyes. "This is a restaurant, Laith. See if you can find the kitchen. I need clean towels and water. Can you do that?"

He nodded.

"What does Mama need?"

“Towels and water.”

“Good.” She pulled her phone out of her overcoat pocket, switched on the built-in flashlight app, and handed it to him. He ran off. Rula said a quick prayer for his safety. Then, with shaking hands, she tried to roll up her cotton pants from the bite marks, but it hurt too much. She lay down and tried to breathe. Rula kept her ears open for dogs, both man and animal alike. The last thing she heard was her son’s frantic footsteps pattering back and forth. Back and forth.

#

Baana had just opened a can of corn when she heard the scream. She set aside her dinner, adjusted her bright, polka-dot pants, and followed the noise. She gathered a scarf around her shoulders and ran, her tangled blond hair flopping behind her.

She heard a dog bark nearby. She fished around in her oversized pockets for the mini air horn keychain she’d hooked to her keys. Turning the blue cap slightly to the left emitted a sound that would make any speedboat envious. She heard a soft yip and scuttling paws receding. A soft cry came from inside Farawla, a restaurant she’d looted months ago. She opened the window, careful not to spook whoever was inside.

The sight before her almost made her faint. A little boy shook his mother who lay on the floor, blood pooling around her calf. She crouched next to the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Laith,” he hiccupped.

“Laith, did you call the hospital?” she asked softly.

“The phone isn’t working.” He held up his mother’s phone. It was dead.

Baana hadn’t owned a phone in at least a year. There was no point since she had nobody to call. “Let’s help Mama feel better, okay?”

Laith nodded.

She found the towels and cup of water the boy had probably gathered and started cleaning the wound, moving aside the open overcoat that fell a little below the woman's knee. Underneath, she had on blue-striped pajamas. Baana couldn't linger on that, what with the red seeping onto everywhere. This wasn't good. There was too much of it. She was no doctor, though, so she wasn't sure. How much blood could someone lose? She cleaned the wound with water and wrapped a towel tightly around it. She could already see red blooming on the white fabric. Maybe the first-aid kit she'd heckled out of the hotel dweller would help. If her hands weren't skilled enough to make her better, maybe medicines could.

"I'm going to go get some things to help your mom. If someone tries to get in, scream as loud as you can, mashee?" She was reluctant to be spending her resources, but the fas'oun was staring at her like she was some savior. Plus, if his mother died, the kid would end up alone, or worse, in her care.

Baana returned with the first-aid kit and some food. The boy dug in immediately and she set to work. The only thing she knew to do was decontaminate the wound. She gently tugged the fabric of her pant leg away from the wound and tore it away, then, taking the rubbing alcohol, she paused. Laith was preoccupied with his meal and didn't seem to be paying any attention. "Bismillah," she whispered, pouring a generous amount of the liquid into the wound.

Rula made a noise and stirred. Baana worked quickly, packing the wound and wrapping it in towels.

"Look at that, Dr. Baana. Not so bad," she mumbled.

#

Rula thought she heard a voice. A woman. Was it her mother? Her mother was always so kind. With a gentle voice, she tried to convince Rula and her father that marrying someone from

Hama, no less a member of the Shakfeh family, might not be in Rula's best interest. That wasn't right. At the time, both she and her mother were dazzled by Ahmad's good manners and the way he treated his family, plus, the comfort his family lived in was an added bonus. Baba was the one who fought her on it. Maybe she should have listened.

Rula watched the world come into focus. Dust and ash filtered through the window above her. The entire restaurant was covered in dust. It reminded her of the footage she saw on television of the Titanic's ballroom wreckage underwater. She felt a chill. Then all at once the pain drove through her calf and she yelped.

"Easy, easy," a woman whispered, touching Rula's shoulder lightly. She looked to be around Rula's age with lanky limbs like those inflatable dancing tubes. A shock of frizzy, unnaturally blond hair teased her shoulders, contrasting with dark eyes.

"Who are you? Where's my son?" she managed. Panic welled like the blood from her leg. A woman out here, with cheaply died hair like that? And what was the costume for? Something for some men's unspeakable obsessions?

"I'm Baana," she said, sitting back. "Laith is sleeping. I heard the noise and came to help. What's your name?"

"Rula," she said, pursing her lips. She gripped her leg.

Baana reached for the bottle of water she had brought with her and poured a cup for Rula, following it up with two pain relief pills. "I know. I'm going find someone to call an ambulance. Someone will walk by eventually. They always do."

"You mean like nawar?" Rula asked. Her tongue felt thick, too big for her mouth. "They won't help."

Baana paused, the pills in her hand. "Oh, really? Who're considered nawar in your eyes?"

Rula tried to read Baana's face, but her thoughts were hazy like cotton candy. Maybe she had offended her. Not wanting to offend her further, Rula fumbled for a definition that didn't involve prostitutes, just in case. "You know ... people who cause trouble. Corrupted youth. Lowlives? I dunno. Nawar."

Baana was silent.

"Do you live here?" Rula continued.

Baana helped her sit up to drink and take the meds. "Yes. Only a few people do. Some are from neighboring farms; others come here after they've been denied a ticket to leave for whatever reason. Mostly people come and go."

"Why would they come *here*?"

Baana shrugged. "I used to work here. I lived in a mazra'ah just a few miles that way." She pointed in the opposite direction from where Rula came. Rula could picture the cluster of villas from the road that banked to the right just before reaching the airport. "Assad's forces kicked me out last month."

"And your family?"

"I'm alone. I was the groundskeeper for a family that ran away when the war started." She poured herself a cup of water. "They told me to stay and protect their house, but what could I do against men with guns? I'm only one person. When they told me to leave, I walked here. I can't afford to leave the country."

"I used to live in a mazra'ah, too," Rula said quietly. "I had to leave, though. My brother-in-law chased me out. He wants to take my son away."

"Ya Allah," Baana breathed. There was empathy in her tone that Rula didn't expect. "Why?"



“I asked for a divorce when the war started. We have...different views on the conflict. My ex-husband wants to take Laith even after I got full custody. He sent his brother, a military man, after me to take him by force.”

“Son of a dog.”

“That’s right,” Rula said. She could still feel the cold that seeped into her home after she’d first disagreed with her husband Ahmad about what was best for Syria. She tolerated his verbal jabs and sudden mood swings as the world around them blazed with determination. She tolerated it when he made certain their eldest son Hatim would be enlisted. Two weeks later, her beautiful boy returned in a body bag. She tolerated when he splashed her face with hot coffee, yelling about how bitter it was. With blistered cheeks and an inflamed eye, she asked for a divorce and received it without question.

Baana nodded toward her sleeping son. “How old is he?”

“Laith? He’s only four, but sometimes he sounds older.”

“The family I lived with had a daughter who sounded that way when the war started. She was seven but talking politics like it was her mother tongue.”

“Victory will come soon, and our children will have their childhoods again.” She’d been saying that since the revolutions started, with hope strumming off each syllable. Now as she heard herself say it, it was nothing more than a hollowed echo.

#

Baana watched Laith stir from his sleep, as she was spooning some corn from a can. When he opened his eyes, he stared warily at her, reaching for his Mama.

“Do you want some more food?” She asked after a moment.

Laith nodded.

Baana opened another can for him and offered a spoon. He ate a few bites and set it down. He didn't seem like the intelligent talker that Rula thought he was. Maybe all mothers thought their children were geniuses. Children were still children, though. She rummaged through her bag filled with things she'd collected around the park. When she turned back to Laith, she had a big red clown nose on her face and fuzzy white gloves.

She wiggled her fingers and in a singsong voice said, "*Kaan ya makan fi adeem el zamaan, kaan fi mouharreja esma Razan.*"

He smiled and sat back. Baana continued with the parody fairytale of a clown named Razan who was stuck in a tower because she forgot the magic words to come down. Just before Baana got to the end of the story, she heard some voices and laughter outside the tent. "Just a second, ainy." She unbolted the door of the restaurant from the inside and pushed it open, sprinting out of the restaurant. A few feet away three boys swaggered, the oldest one who was not a day over sixteen had hair greased back with so much gel it looked wet, the one in the middle, the tallest of them looked the youngest, and the third boy had a buzz cut that made his head look flat as a table. Table Head and Grease Hair were smoking even though they were way too young.

"Ya wlad," she called, "Come here."

They kept walking.

"Wait, could I use a phone?" She closed the distance between them. "Please. I have to call an ambulance."

They stared at her like she was speaking a foreign language. Then Grease Hair stomped out his cigarette. "Is this some kind of joke?"

She remembered then that she was still wearing her clown outfit. Taking off her nose, she gestured with her gloved hands. “Come see for yourself. A woman is hurt.”

The boys followed her, probably from some sick curiosity. At the sight of Rula, one of them quickly reached for his phone. He handed it to Baana.

She dialed and pressed the phone to her ear. “Alo? I need an ambulance. A woman was bitten by a dog.”

“Where are you located?”

“Happy Land, on airport highway.”

“Is this another prank call? Nawar...”

“No! There’s a woman bleeding—” Baana heard a click. She held the phone dumbly. “They shut the phone in my face. Thought I was kidding.” Baana shook her head. That word echoed in her head, again and again. She huffed. “All right. Help me carry her to the circus tent. She needs to get away from this dust and dirt.

The boys looked at each other and did as they were told. As they carried Rula away, she woke up pained and disoriented. She cried out for someone named Hatim and Baana had to tell her he wasn’t there. The more Baana tried to convince her that Hatim wasn’t around, and that she was here, in Happy Land, the deeper into hysteria Rula fell. Laith followed closely behind, holding his mother’s hand.

The circus arena was roofless. Baana had taken the canvas material and repurposed it. In some places, she created smaller tents, others, hammocks. The boys set Rula down in one of them.

“What do we do now?” Table Head asked.

“Go to the hospital and tell them to send an ambulance. Hurry.”

The boys looked uneasy. “We don’t have a car,” Grease Hair said.

Baana gaped. “How did you get here?”

“We drove—well, Louai drove,” Tall One said, pointing at Grease Hair. “But the car is parked at Alf Leila w Leila.”

“Are you old enough to drive?” She asked the one named Louai.

He smiled sheepishly. “I’m sixteen. That’s legal in some countries.”

Baana covered her face with her hands. She couldn’t have a sixteen-year-old drive Rula to the hospital. “Tayyeb. That restaurant is a thirty-minute walk from here,” Baana said evenly. “You boys better run. Then drive back where you came from and have an adult drive you to the hospital. Are we clear?” She hadn’t realized she raised her voice. The boys stared. She shooed them with her hands. “Yalla! What are you waiting for?”

They started running, Table Head looked back and waved. “Ya Allah,” Baana whined. The nearest hospital wasn’t for miles. A half hour away if they drove and weren’t stopped at any checkpoints. Rula was getting paler; Baana wondered how much longer she could hold on.

When Rula woke up next, Baana fed her canned olives and corn. She also found a few stuffed animals from the carnival game booths and gave them to Laith. The next morning, there was no sign of the boys or the ambulance.

Baana checked the bandage and saw the skin was infected. She’d asked locals for help, all of whom had refused, and no others had stopped by.

As the sun began to set, she heard the sound of an engine rumbling through the park. “Rula,” Baana said, nudging her shoulder gently. “I think the ambulance is here.”

“Are you sure?” Rula slurred. Her eyes fluttered.

Baana shook her more firmly. “I’ll check but you have to stay awake.” She peeked out the tent and careened her neck to see a jeep turning the corner, headed in their direction. The large headlights and green exterior made Baana pale.

“It’s a soldier. I don’t know if—”

“Let him come,” she whispered back. “I don’t know how much longer I can handle this.”

“No, I won’t let that happen,” Baana said. “What about Laith?”

She shook her head. “Don’t let my husband take him. He’s a bad man.”

“But...” Baana started to panic. “Where...? I don’t have any family.”

“Could *you*? Will you...” She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Rula, I can’t—”

“Then find someone who can. But I trust you with him, Baana. I didn’t think I could, but I do. Please take care of him.”

Baana looked at Laith, who swung on a hammock several feet away. When he saw her staring, he grinned and waved his stuffed elephant. She could decide later.

She told Laith that he needed to hide from the bad man, and he understood. Once she made sure he wouldn’t be found amongst her stockpile of maintenance uniforms inside an obscure tent, she went outside the circus ring. “Jundi!” she waved frantically, praying that it wasn’t him. That he had never met Rula. That he would take her to a hospital. “This woman needs help. Help!”

The soldier parked nearby and sprinted over. He had a military build, thick, bushy eyebrows, and a thin moustache. He smelled like cigarettes and cheap perfume. She tried to remain impassive as she led him inside.

“Rula?” he said, rushing to her bedside. Baana exhaled and shot a disappointed look towards the heavens. His hand immediately went to inspect Rula’s wound. “Where’s Laith?” He looked at Baana. “Where’s the boy?”

“What boy? She was alone,” Baana said.

“Yil’an abouke, Rula!” he hissed, grabbing her collar. “Where’s the boy?” Rula had passed out again.

Baana ran over to them, grabbing the man’s arm before she knew what she was doing. “Are you crazy?” she said. “Can’t you see she needs a hospital?”

He growled as he tossed her over his shoulder, exiting as swiftly as he came.

Baana ran a hand through her hair, the other one cradling her twisted stomach. What had she done? She fell to her knees. “Laith?” she called out softly as she heard the jeep screech away.

The boy crawled out from his hiding spot, and then looked around in a panic. “He took Mama?” His lips twisted and tears sprung from his eyes.

“Hush. He’s going to help her, mashee?” she assured him as much as she tried to assure herself.

#

An hour later, Baana was trying to cheer up Laith with her clown act. She was happy her face was concealed behind a mask this time, hiding a tear-streaked cheeks. Laith had been crying hard since he knew about his mother, and only now had begun to listen to her fairytales again. It was around the time she saw him smile again that she heard the siren. She pulled off her mask and clown nose, tossing them aside and wiping her face before she ran out of the ring. An ambulance stopped not far from the tent. Tailing it in an old, black car were the three boys along with a man who looked to be in his twenties.

“Where’s the emergency?” The paramedic asked Baana as he hopped out of the ambulance.

“She’s—a man took her an hour ago. I don’t know where.”

“Really?” He glared at the boys, who had just walked over, then back at Baana. “This is the third call this week to this dump. You think we don’t have people to save? Don’t you know how full hospitals are these days? You think this is *funny*?” He pointed an accusatory finger at her. “Think again before you prank call a hospital with your boyfriends, nawar.” He climbed back into the ambulance, slammed the door, and drove off.

Louai swore at the paramedic. Table Head pulled out a cigarette. Tall One sat next to Baana who sank to the floor.

Laith came out of the tent and sat on Baana’s other side. “You’re not nawar,” he mumbled, and then placed his head on her lap. Baana ripped off her clown gloves and threw them into the dirt.

*Damascus, 2013*

## **FINDING SALAAM**

Baba's Hummer screeched to a halt in front of the villa gates. My hand unclenched the door handle I'd been squeezing during the twenty-minute car ride, and I clambered out of the car. He was already unloading my suitcases, grunting under the weight of the second one.

"Did you pack your entire room?" he said.

"More or less." I didn't want to tell him I took all of Mama's journals, and that the suitcase didn't have a single piece of clothing in it. In her lifetime, Mama filled enough journals to stock a small library. My siblings and I were forbidden to read any of them when she was around, but now that she was gone, I found no reason not to peek inside. Knowing Baba, a man who never cracked open a single book, the journals would just gather dust.

"I'll see you in a few weeks," Baba said, giving me his playful salute that was not playful to me anymore, especially when he was in his military uniform. Especially when a smile hadn't touched his face in weeks. I wasn't a little girl anymore, and I didn't need his strange way of comforting me, if that's what he called it. I had my own views on the war now that didn't necessarily match up to his.

"Khatrak," I said politely. I tucked a runaway curl under my hijab and smiled, then walked up the steps to Teita Huda's house. I felt a weight leave my shoulders as his car turned the corner.

#

Before Mama died, she went insane. It started when she looked at Baba sometimes and screamed, a hair-raising cry that had sent the neighbors running to our door. I'd always guided



her away and sang to her until her breaths came easier. Her favorite song was, “We Will Remain Here,” a sad yet hopeful tune about perseverance and loving home. It didn’t take long for the neighbors to stop coming, and my singing to only make her cry out louder. She writhed in my arms, as if my touch burned her skin. I let the library doors slam in my face, the lock turning with smug satisfaction.

She spent hours in there writing—Mama loved to write. When I was little, she would read me her poetry, her voice rising and falling like harp strings. “Poetry is the hardest and most rewarding kind of writing, Tala,” she said once. “Once the pieces lock together, that’s how you know the poem is done—when you can’t pry the words from each other.”

I’m the one who found her on library floor. Her blue dress soaked in a deep shade of purple. I couldn’t pry the knife from her grip.

We will never call it suicide. Our faith damned such a thing. When she passed, I prayed for her soul, cried every night asking God to have mercy on her. I didn’t know why she would do such a thing. Why the life she lived—the comfort, the community, the city—wasn’t enough. Baba said the war was too much for her.

We buried Mama on a Friday. My brother Farouk attended the funeral and left the following Monday to enlist upon Baba’s orders. Baba, an army general, had enough on his plate—what with strategizing the war and working all his connections to get my older sister Nedda out of prison—and had tasked me with sorting and packing Mama’s things. I didn’t mind. My mother had kept to herself the few months before her death and she had become something of a mystery. No one was allowed to disturb her sacred peace. The library became her sanctuary. Inside, her whispers bubbled like a freshwater spring. We didn’t know if she was writing or

praying, and I wondered if to her they were the same. Pen to paper, perhaps she was writing to God Himself.

#

It was Rula who opened the villa door for me. Her eyes were still sunken from grief, but the bounce in her step made me hopeful. It must've been hard losing your son and sister-in-law in such a short amount of time, not to mention separating from your husband. She was a strong lady.

Rula buried me in a hug and then looked me over. "You're so grown up. You're becoming a beautiful young woman."

"I *am* a beautiful young woman," I quipped, though I wanted to point out that I wasn't a kid anymore. I didn't think there was enough emphasis there, so I added, "I'm fourteen."

She still pinched my cheeks, and I faked the widest smile before walking away.

"Where's my grandma?"

"She's praying. She'll be down any second. Need help taking your things up to the room?"

"I'll manage." I rolled the heavy suitcase and my light duffel bag of clothes to the elevator just outside the foyer and pressed the button. That thing was a deathtrap, always breaking down when the power went out. The villa had a generator, but guess what elevator operation was connected to it? The fan. Smart, right? Either way, I'd rather take my chances than drag Mama's journals up four flights of stairs.

The guest bedroom was bigger than mine back home with a high ceiling littered with spotlights. Sunlight drenched the room through sheer green curtains, and a plushy, white throw accented a corner of the earthy green comforter. A pair of tall, oak wardrobes loomed on the wall

across the bed, and on the adjacent wall, a huge vanity with a white leather chair reflected the light back into the room. I'd only brought a deodorant stick and some body splash with me, but all that vanity countertop space made me want to go out and buy some perfumes, some facial products, maybe a bit of makeup. Heck, why not throw in some foot cream, too. Massage my feet into marshmallows on that ultra plushy, white throw.

I hauled my clothes onto the wardrobe floor and rummaged through drawers in search of the keys. I found two golden ones in the vanity drawer and rattled the keys into each hole. I unpacked the journals, placing them in order by volume. When I finished, I had an almost identical placement from the way I'd found them in our library cabinet back home.

I had unfastened the key to that cabinet from the gold chain around Mama's neck when we performed the ritual bath on her body. They told me I didn't have to be there. I shouldn't be because I was too young. I didn't just stick around; I washed, combed and wove Mama's wavy hair into three long braids while Rula and Teita Huda washed the rest of her body. I pocketed the key before anyone else saw me. I know if Nedda was there, she would've noticed.

I had the journals, and no one was going to take them from me. I thought I might as well open one now. Her first journal was small, brown, and leather bound, its pages yellowed along the edges.

The first volume was all poems. I wasn't too versed in formal Arabic to understand everything she wrote. I could point out the areas where she mentioned a pregnancy, but it had to be Farouk. I wondered if there were poems about me. Skimming the rest of that volume, I kept seeing mention of a demon. He was always there, lurking among her rosy verses like a snake in the garden. I wondered if my mother was possessed, if that's what made her crazy. *The library is*

*my holy place*, she'd written, *a sanctuary where demons don't care to enter*. Do demons talk about themselves in the third person? I concluded she wasn't a demon.

I checked out a few more, skimming for mention of Nedda. Surely enough after three volumes of lurking demons and baby Farouk, I spotted another pregnancy on the page. I kept skimming, letting my curiosity rove over the pages. Just a taste so I knew what I was getting into. Four more volumes and there I was, "dancing in the womb/a mermaid in a rosy seashell." I wonder if my mom was disappointed that I never got into dance, and that I couldn't be caught dead in a skirt even if you paid me.

Did she ever write how disappointed she was in me? I needed to know. I skipped to two years ago when I was really a pain in her butt. She always seemed angry with me then. The journal dated 2011, only five journals down from Tala as Mermaid Fetus, had a rudimentary portrait of Mama on the cover. No doubt it was Nedda's early work. The sketch, done in a fine-tipped black marker, depicted her face when focused. The worried wrinkles, the frizzy hair, the pendant on her neck that often swung back and forth as she wrote. Mama didn't bother hiding that Nedda was her favorite. Nedda was a fair mediator when Mama and I fought, but when she went to Homs to study that summer, it seemed like Mama couldn't stand living with me. I went and visited Nedda in Homs a few weeks before they took her. Mama retreated into the library when she found out. I rarely saw her after that and expected volumes of poems about how much of a disappointment I was.

Instead of harsh verses about me, I was faced with a jungle of scribbles, tangled and twining gibberish. Maybe she was trying a new visual style. I looked at the three-dozen other journals she had filled, all of them in the past two years. You'd think only two years ago she wouldn't have written triple the amount of volumes she had written over the course of a couple

decades. About thirteen books of poetry and over forty of nonsense. I sifted through more volumes, finding the same style, hoping she would've gotten tired of it after a few journals worth. It only seemed to become more indecipherable. I hoped that somehow those hours she spent locked in that library paid off. Give me something, Mama. Twenty volumes in, I took my words back. The manic scrawls became clearly written words. Back in her neat font that inked words into roses. Only, it was just a sentence. Four words. Written over and over again. Pages upon pages with no variation.

My name is Salaam. My name is Salaam. My name is Salaam.

I floated in a pool of brown journals. I'd ripped each one from the closet. I counted thirty-four books heavy with that phrase. Did I miss something? My mom Suad said she was Salaam. She wrote that for two years—I thought she was fine then. Okay, maybe she was losing some weight but everyone had complimented her. Tell us your dieting secrets, they'd said.

Salaam? That was bananas. Was she telling the truth? I wondered if Baba knew anything.

#

Baba came by to visit three weeks later. In that time, I learned a few things by listening to conversations between Teita and Rula. That's the thing about being seen as little. They forget you can hear. You could be sitting there sifting through a journal, and then the air goes stale and it's filled with murmurs of Baba Saeed like he's He Who Must Not Be Named. I knew he wasn't an ideal dad, but what father was? But the things they said about how he acted with my grandma made me wonder about the demon in mama's poetry.

Perched at the top of the steps, I watched him rattle with the door for a minute. When he finally shoved it open, he took off his general's hat, tossed it on the foyer couch, and smoothed

his ridiculous, horizontally spiked hair. Brown splatters dotted his arm, and even from the top of the steps, I could see his neck smeared with sweat and blood. Would it kill him to shower before he came over? Before I'd even decided to sneak away, he'd spotted me at the top of the steps and waved wildly. I smiled and made my way down.

"I have good news," he said. I've never seen him look so giddy, the same kind of joy of when I told my little cousin that I was taking him to the snack shack around the corner. "Where's everybody?"

"Not here. What is it?"

"Nedda's coming home."

I blinked. "What?" I can't even explain the ripple that thrummed in me. Like that soaring I'd felt when I gathered with my cousins after they came back from that rally where Qashoush sang his last revolutionary song. Weightlessness. The feeling that something was finally going to go right. "How? Are you sure it's her?" It was a strange question, but one I'd rolled around my tongue countless times upon hearing it from others. I guess sometimes they give you the wrong person. Then after more searching and a ton of money to get faster results, they tell you, sorry, actually your loved one died a month ago.

"I'm sure," Baba said. He pulled out a Polaroid from his pocket. I noticed his knuckles were cracked and blue.

The woman in the picture was definitely Nedda. A pallid, eye-sunken, thin version of her, but her nonetheless. How many women had an upside-down, cat-faced beauty mark above their brows? I tried to hand the photo back, but he told me to keep it. "When's she coming?" I said.

“Some of my men are bringing her here later today.” The Hummer’s horn blared and Baba looked back towards the door. “I have to pick up a few things from the base. I’ll be back tonight. Tell your grandma.” He picked up his hat and practically skipped out the door.

I leaned against the wall. I remembered then I didn’t talk to him about Mama, but for the moment I didn’t care. My sister was alive, and that was all that mattered.

#

An hour later, Teita, Rula, and I shuffled in the kitchen fixing together one of their elaborate table spreads. They’d put me in charge of cleaning the house and making sure the guest room where I slept was ready to be shared between us. Since then, I had restacked Mama’s journals in one wardrobe, and used the other to hang my clothes. In preparation for Nedda’s arrival, I moved my clothes into the closet with the books and left the other empty for Nedda’s belongings. I knew she wouldn’t have any extra clothes on her, so I excused myself to go home and pick up a few of her things.

I took a cab to our apartment and packed her favorite skirts, jackets, and jeans. On my way out, I stopped at our library, picking up the letters Farouk told me to give to Nedda. I paused at the table. Should I search for any little clues Mama may have left behind like the main character of an adventure movie? The movies made it look easy. I didn’t know where to start looking, and I didn’t want to show up after Nedda got to the villa. I abandoned that idea and made my way back.

I heard the army jeep roll through the front gate before I saw it. I threw open the door, but hid behind it. My hijabs were upstairs. I peeked through the thin windows on either side of the door and watched a soldier climb out of the jeep and help my sister out. I hated myself for thinking it, but my first thought seeing this pallid, impossibly thin creature headed my way was

*that's not my sister.* Not my rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed sister Nedda. It was a wraith and it was headed my way.

I darted, bumped into Rula, mumbled something about forgetting something in my room, and sprinted up the steps. I hid out of sight of the railing that overlooked the foyer. I crept a little closer to get a view of the door. The only way they would see me is if they looked up and to the right. Teita and Rula stood where I was just a minute before. Once the soldiers rolled away and out the gate, they both rushed outside to help Nedda up the steps. Teita wiped her cheeks and closed the door behind them. Nedda disappeared into Teita's fleshy bust. When I said I literally couldn't see her anymore as Teita cried and hugged my sister, I meant it. Nedda reappeared as she pulled away and smiled faintly.

I shuffled deeper into the room. I couldn't see her like this. Nedda who let me scoot next to her on nights where shadows in my room morphed into nightmares. Nedda who kept the aunties off my tail about the way I dressed. Nedda who made sure Mama and I weren't at each other's throats. And now Mama was gone and my sister was a husk barely able to climb the entrance steps.

"Where's Tala and Farouk?" she asked. "Where's my mom?"

No one had told her. I didn't want her to know about Mama right away. I couldn't see her shatter, not when she was fragile and cracked. I hopped to my feet and sprinted down the winding steps. "I'm right here," I called. I ran into Nedda's embrace. Her body was so thin, my arms felt long and clumsy. She gripped me with strength that looked lost on her, but I held on with much less force, terrified that anything more would break her. I sniffled. She held my shoulders and took me in. Her eyes were massive, weighed down by two blackish blue bags. Dissolved was the baby fat in her cheeks, the bone clearly visible. Her hijab was just a torn piece



of tarp wrapped around her head and neck, hair sticking out from the textile's holes. But her smile was bright, her hands soft as they wiped the water from my cheeks. They roamed over my hair—she always loved my tight curls. She brought my hair forward, over my shoulders.

“Hayati, I missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’m so happy you’re okay.” I wiped my nose on my sleeve. I wanted to say more, but it felt like meeting a famous person for the first time. You think you can keep your cool, that you know exactly what to say, and that you’ll say it perfectly, but once they’re in front of you, you want to do nothing more than stare with stars in your eyes.

“Is Mama here?” she asked again, her gaze roaming around the villa.

“She’s not here,” Teita said.

“Let’s go upstairs.” I said. “You can take a nice hot shower and change into something clean.” I took her hand and we walked to the elevator.

While Nedda showered, I looked through Mama’s early journals to pick a poem out for her. There were some cute ones with her and Farouk running around, but I found one instead when Nedda was eight or nine, titled “When Angels Laugh”:

*When angels laugh, the clattering of  
Hastily placed teacups  
Halts as if teacup and saucer agree  
That sound could bring the dead to life.*

*When angels laugh, stuffed animal guests  
Softened, bristled fur conditioned  
Smoothered and soothed, taming even the lion*

*Whose snarl kept him from the table*

*When angels laugh, god looks down on her creation,*

*Smiles and takes the cup of tea they poured for her,*

*Says, for as long as I'm alive, I will care for you*

*For as long as you live, may your laughter be a prayer that*

*Quiets the chaos and softens the demons of this world.*

*Ameen.*

I wasn't sure what demon Mama referred to, but I hoped it would resonate with Nedda after whatever demons she may have faced the past year and a half.

Nedda took longer in the shower than I expected, though I shouldn't have been surprised. From what I heard about prison cells, I'd want to scrub my body raw. When she came out, her face had pinked from the heat of the shower. Her wavy hair was just long enough to cover her ears. With her body hidden under sweats and long-sleeved tee, it almost looked like nothing had changed.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. "We made all your favorites."

"Yeah, sounds great."

I moved the bookmark to the poem and left the journal on the bed.

Dinners were generally filled with gossip and the occasional religious debate. This time, it was mostly quiet. Nedda asked questions about what she'd missed, and we answered in brief terms, avoiding mention of Mama. She didn't eat much and excused herself early to sleep. Not

an hour after she left, Baba came through the door asking for her. He decided to stay the night so he could see her bright and early the next day.

I purposely waited a couple hours before turning in for the night, waiting for Nedda to drift off. When I got upstairs, there she was, sitting on the bed, reading mama's journal. When she saw me, she smiled and she felt like my older sister again.

"I was waiting up for you." Nedda closed the journal and beckoned me over. I sat next to her on the bed. "We didn't get to talk at all. How have you been?"

"Fine I guess." I drew circles on the furry throw draped over the comforter. "The house wasn't the same without you."

"I'm here now. You won't lose me again." She joined in with my drawing. Her fingers were bruised, her pinky crooked. I didn't comment. We sat in silence, drawing on that comforter. Nedda drew a bird. I kept drawing an eye, over and over again.

"Please say something, Tala." She said after a while. "You don't have to treat me different. I just want things to go back to normal."

"Mama's gone," I whispered.

"What?"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. You need to know. She passed a couple months ago."

She covered her mouth. Choked. I snuggled against her.

"How?"

"It's complicated. Her mind got sick. She couldn't handle it. She's with Allah now." I rubbed her arm as she wept. My eyes stung. I took a breath. "She kept to herself towards the end. She—died in her sleep. She found peace." I didn't expect myself to lie, but it seemed right. I was glad I did.

I held her until she calmed down.

“I wish I’d been around.”

“Me, too.” I wondered, if Nedda hadn’t been arrested, could she have talked Mama out of it, noticed signs I didn’t? Nedda was always better at that than I was.

She lay down and put her head on my lap. “Where’s Farouk?”

“Aleppo.” I started playing with her hair. She tensed then relaxed, moving my hand for me to indicate she was okay with it. “He wrote to me a while ago and said he abandoned the Armed Forces and joined the FSA as a medic.”

“I’m proud of him.” Nedda smiled. I was supposed to be reassuring her, using all my words to make it better, and all she had to do was smile and I was okay. I kissed her forehead.

“And you? What have you been doing?”

“School mostly. It hasn’t been the same without you.”

We let the crickets outside fill the space between us. Holding my sister here, I didn’t want to uncover the past. I just wanted a better future.

“Tala?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you sing me a song?”

I blinked away the wetness that rimmed my eyes. I sang the song I always sang to Mama.

*We will stay here, so the pain goes away. We will live here, we will sweeten the melody.*

I sang into her hair long after she drifted off. When morning came, I would burn the mad journals. I would make sure Nedda never saw that madness, and may she never face that after what she’d been through. I wanted as close to normal of a life we could get, even if that meant letting go.

## **APPENDIX: READING LIST**

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