

WHEN THE APRICOTS BLOOM



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Basra Province, 1978

Huda fished the knife from the pocket of her long apricot dress. Rania eyed the *jambiya's* sharp tip and buffalo-horn handle and grinned in approval.

“That’s perfect for our oath.” Rania’s amber eyes dilated with a jittery mix of fear and anticipation. “It’s even better than the knife in the American movie.”

“Last week, I saw a real American. A woman,” said the younger girl proudly. “She was on the corniche, eating ice cream and watching the boats.”

“I’ve seen plenty of foreign women in Baghdad.” said her fourteen-year-old companion, not to be outdone. “Teachers and nurses, mostly. They like to picnic by the Tigris.”

“Do you think they’ve ever sworn an oath like this?” Huda stared up at Rania. She’d grown taller and slimmer in the three months she’d been away at the prestigious Baghdad Ladies High School. Huda felt dowdy beside her, even in her favorite dress.

“What should we say?” she asked.

Rania eyed the double-bladed knife in Huda’s hand. The ivory

handle was stained from years of use. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders.

"Today we vow to be blood sisters," she intoned. "Closer than sisters from the same womb."

Impressed, Huda nodded and repeated the pledge. The two girls added a promise of loyalty and to come to one another's aid whenever called.

"Don't forget about secrets," said Huda. "We mustn't keep secrets from each other."

Rania paused, then pressed her hand to her heart. "No secrets."

"What's the punishment for breaking a blood oath?" asked Huda.

Rania consulted the cloudless sky, its blue so perfect it could break a heart.

"If the blood oath is broken," she declared theatrically, "then the penalty is sorrow."

Huda threw her a skeptical glance.

"Sorrow?" she said. "For how long? A day? A week? It's got to be more than that."

Rania raised her chin imperiously.

"Sorrow for the oath breaker," she declared, "and for the generation that follows her."

Huda nodded and echoed her words. Slowly, their eyes swiveled to the dagger. Rania swallowed nervously. Huda wondered if she would back out. Would the oath count if it wasn't sealed in blood? Without it, would Rania return to her new friends and forget all about her vow with a simple village girl?

"Do you want to skip the blood part?" Huda offered reluctantly.

"No way." Rania shook her head. "That's the most important thing."

Huda grinned in relief.

"Okay, let's prick our thumbs and press them together." She handed the dagger to Rania. "You do it, cut my thumb."

"Really?" Rania winced. "Are you sure?"

“Do it,” said Huda. Rania wouldn’t find many girls at Baghdad Ladies High School prepared to risk a digit for a friend.

Rania raised the knife, grit her teeth, and jabbed the point into the soft flesh of Huda’s thumb.

“Ouch!” Huda hobbled about, trying not to bleed on her long dress. “I thought you’d give me a countdown.”

Rania eyed the blood dripping from Huda’s thumb onto the sand. Her face turned the color of summer grass.

“Hurry.” She thrust the knife at Huda. “Before I lose my nerve.”

Huda pressed the dagger to Rania’s thumb, felt the skin resist the blade. Rania closed her eyes and turned her head. Huda pushed. The skin parted beneath the knife like a boiled egg, deeper than she expected. Rania’s eyes flew open, big and wide as a calf’s. They grabbed each other’s hand and pressed their thumbs together.

“Sisters forever.” They locked eyes. “Or sorrow for us and the generation to come.”

CHAPTER 1



Baghdad, 2002

Huda paced her backyard, trying to brush off her spat with her husband. In the distance, above al-Dora refinery, columns of flames pierced the night. An easterly wind pushed the stench of the burning gas away from New Baghdad, so all Huda could smell were the orange and apricot trees by the fence. She knew the wind could turn at any time, but right then the gas flares were beautiful, like candles lined up on a giant's birthday cake.

The bell rang at the front gate. Huda paused mid-step and wondered, Had Abdul Amir forgotten his keys when he stormed off to the coffee shop? Or had her husband cooled down and decided to eat dinner with her after all? Huda hurried inside through the kitchen door. A nougat box lay spread-eagled on the counter, cellophane wrappers strewn like evidence of a hasty crime. Huda frowned and swept them into the bin. So much for her diet.

The bell sounded again. Something in its flat, insistent tone made her falter. She scurried down the hallway, heels slapping against the tile. In the foyer, she paused by a console table decorated with family portraits. The largest of the pewter frames faced

the wall. Huda flipped it around. The president stared back at her, eyes dark as tar. Medals marched across his chest.

She quickly moved the president's portrait to a prominent position between a photo of her and Abdul Amir on their wedding day, and a snap of their son, Khalid, wearing a suit and tie at his thirteenth birthday party. Next, she set to work unlocking the front door: unlatching chains, turning keys, sliding dead bolts. She ran her hands over her hair and heaved open the door. Two secret police officers strode down the driveway.

Huda quivered. *Lock the bolts; hide under the bed*, she thought. But she knew that wouldn't work. These men were like dogs: show fear and they bite. Behind them, the padlock from the gate lay in chunks on the concrete. The broken metal caught the glare of the floodlights over the carport. The larger of the two men shoved a pair of bolt cutters into the pocket of his leather jacket. Huda imagined his pockets contained all sorts of instruments: for breaking, slicing, and prizing apart.

"As-salaam alaikum." Her voice wobbled. "What brings you here tonight, my countrymen?"

"Sister, my apologies for a visit at the dinner hour," called Abu Issa, the older and slighter of the two men. He too was wearing a boxy leather jacket. Men like him were never without them, night or day, even when the sun scorched the blue from the sky and the bitumen on the roads melted into sticky pools.

Without waiting for an invitation, Abu Issa and his bolt-cutting partner barreled through the front door. Their bulk filled the foyer and pushed the oxygen out. Huda retreated down the hallway, careful not to turn her back. The men followed. Sand crunched beneath their boots—no amount of sweeping could keep the desert out. The fine grains went where they wanted, just like the officers of the *mukhabarat*.

"May I offer you tea?" Huda's voice came out high and tight.

"Yes, please, dear," said Abu Issa. "Three sugars."

"Two only for me," grunted the larger man. "I'm watching my weight."

Huda waved them into the sitting room and then ducked into the kitchen. In the window above the sink, her reflection stared back at her. Her large dark eyes were even wider than normal, and her plump cheeks were whittled into tight angles. The mouth that Abdul Amir once likened to a rosebud was a bloodless line. No matter how often Huda saw it, she was always surprised by how fear transformed the most familiar face into that of a stranger.

She asked herself, why were Abu Issa and his partner here? It had been only two weeks since their last visit. *Please, Khalid, she prayed, forget your curfew. Stay at Bakr's and play computer games.*

Huda quickly warmed the tea in the kettle and poured it into three thimble-size *istikan* glasses. The liquid leaped over the hourglass sides and pooled in the delicate saucers. She wiped them clean, balanced the tea, sugar bowl, and spoons on a tray, and carried them into the sitting room.

“Sit, sit.” Abu Issa waved her toward a corner chair—as if he were the host and she were the visitor. His bolt-cutting partner stared at her, eyes flat as night. Huda’s breath bunched in her throat.

“Let us chat,” said Abu Issa, “about your work at the Australian embassy.”

Huda nodded. This was not the first time the mukhabarat had come asking questions about events at the embassy: correspondence and meetings, comings and goings, the latest rumors. Everyone who worked with foreigners could expect such visits. Her lacquered nails carved half-moons into her palms. *Think of your good salary*, she reminded herself. Besides, if it wasn’t her job, the secret police would find some other pretense to sit on her couch, to drink her tea, to gauge her fealty.

“How can I help you, Abu Issa?” She figured a rotten tooth was best pulled fast. “Is there anything in particular that you would like to know?”

“How is your relationship with Deputy Ambassador Wilson progressing?” He sipped his tea daintily, little finger splayed in the air. “Does he trust you?”

"I do my best to be reliable and professional."

"But does he trust you? Confide in you?"

Huda returned the *istikan* to her lap. Once again, liquid splashed into the saucer and stared at her like a baleful amber eye.

"He hasn't told me anything unusual." She forced a smile, even as her pulse throbbed at her neck. "I do routine typing and filing, as you know. I translate his letters when he has matters to convey to our beloved government."

"And what of his wife?"

Huda blinked.

"His wife?"

"How well do you know her? Are you friends?"

"Ally seems nice enough." Huda shrugged. "Once in a while, she comes to the office to break her boredom, that's all."

Abu Issa raised the tea glass to his lips. He wore a sharp-edged ring with the president's eagle crest. If he slapped her cheek, it would draw blood.

"No doubt your boss tells his wife all manner of things," said Abu Issa. "The foreigners call it *pillow talk*."

Huda stiffened. Her *istikan* rattled in its saucer.

"These Western men are reliant on their wives' advice. They call them partners." Abu Issa shook his head. "Is it a business or a marriage?"

The two men snickered, disgust audible amid their amusement. Abruptly, the Bolt Cutter sat forward and ladled sugar into his tea. The small glass looked ridiculous in his meaty hand. He would need no ring to bloody her cheek.

"These Western women, they like to talk." The humor drained from Abu Issa's laugh. "Every day they go on television and bare their shameful secrets to the cameras, for anyone to see. They confess their sins to some Negro woman called Oprah. It should not be a difficult task then, to win her confidence."

The men eyed her intently. Huda stared at the floor.

"We want you to befriend the diplomat's wife. If the West acts to destabilize our beloved nation, or God forbid, strike us again

with their unholy missiles, your boss will certainly receive warning. He may let it slip to his wife. And, surely, he would make plans to send her out of the country.”

“I don’t think—”

“Stay close to the diplomat’s wife.” Abu Issa sat forward. “Watch and listen. She may give us early warning, like a dog that howls before the *sharqi* blows in from the desert.”

The front door rattled. The knob thumped against the foyer wall. Khalid’s sneakers squelched over the tiles in the hallway.

“Mom? Dad?”

Huda’s heart constricted. She put down her tea and dashed out to the hall. Khalid loped toward her, clutching a fragment of the padlock in his fist.

“Somebody cut the—”

“I am busy with guests, my son.” She blocked his path. “Go to your room and wait for me.”

“But the lock . . .” He peered past her shoulder. “Who’s that? Where’s Dad?”

Huda grabbed both of Khalid’s shoulders. She wanted to hug him tight, to crush him to her chest and never let go. Instead, she steered him toward his room.

“Do your homework. Now.”

“Ouch!” Khalid twisted out of her grip. “Your nails hurt.”

She fixed him with her most evil eye. It was the type of glare usually reserved for his most heinous crimes, like the time he cursed in front of his grandmother or when he and Bakr climbed the orange tree and bared their backsides at the teenage girls next door.

“Go!” she hissed.

Khalid shot a final glance past her shoulder, then slouched toward his bedroom. Huda crept back to the sitting room. The mukhabarat had finished their tea.

“We will leave you now, sister. It is late and no doubt you want to take care of your son.” Abu Issa rose to his feet. “He is your most precious possession, is he not?”

* * *

It was almost midnight when Huda gave up waiting for Abdul Amir to come home and crawled into bed. Above her head, the blades of the fan pushed warm air around the bedroom. She lay on her back and cataloged the noise of the night: the buzz of the fluorescent light in the foyer, the gritty wind scraping at the windows, the click-clack of nocturnal insects. She kept her breathing shallow, listening for the dull snap of a lock or the tread of heavy boots on her driveway.

In the distance, a car rumbled. Was Abdul Amir returning from the coffee shop at last? Huda sighed like the creaking fan. These days her husband's black moods were worse than ever. Earlier that evening, when she arrived home from work, he'd been slumped in front of the television, still wearing his baggy pajama pants and singlet.

"I'm hungry," he'd grunted, eyes trained on the TV screen. "What's for dinner?"

Huda slipped out of her kitten-heeled pumps. "I picked up a roast chicken and rice on the way home."

"You're not going to cook lamb stew? You used to cook it every Thursday."

Huda ignored the whine in his voice.

"There's not enough time. Stew can't be rushed or the meat will be tough." She glanced toward the kitchen. "Is Khalid home yet?"

"He's eating dinner at Bakr's house." Abdul Amir stabbed at the buttons on the remote control. "At least my son will get a home-cooked meal."

"Come now, be fair. I didn't have time tonight."

"Tonight. Yesterday. Last week. You are always busy with your work. What sort of wife puts her family second?"

And what sort of husband sits in his pajamas all day?

Abdul Amir kept his eyes on the television. Huda remembered when she would have happily drowned in his sea-green gaze. She remembered when a kind word was never far from his lips, when he whispered little jokes in her ear. Were those days gone forever?

Was that memory, like so many, best forgotten? Huda tried once again to lure her husband from his sour mood.

“I chose a plump chicken. And I will fetch some cucumbers and tomatoes from the garden. You have a magic way with the plants, my dear.”

“You should not be working for foreigners.” Abdul Amir punched the remote again. “They don’t respect our culture. They don’t respect family. Otherwise they would realize a woman should be home in time to prepare a proper dinner.”

He turned his head and glared at her. She glared back.

“Without them we would have no chicken for dinner. No meat at all.”

Abdul Amir lurched from the couch and lumbered past her. She followed him down the hall and into the bedroom. He threw a checked shirt over his singlet and scowled at his master’s in finance diploma hanging in a frame on the wall. After ten years of sanctions, the economy was almost dead. No one needed an analyst like him to check its pulse. Like Iraq itself, Abdul Amir’s pride had taken so many hits, Huda feared it might never recover.

He swapped his pajama pants for trousers and stomped back to the living room.

“These foreigners only want to destroy our country.”

“That’s not true.” Huda pursed her lips in irritation. Of course, she’d thought twice about working at the embassy. Anyone even remotely connected with foreigners, especially Westerners, drew the suspicion of the mukhabarat. A case of the pox was more welcome than that. But what was she supposed to do?

Abdul Amir’s company wasn’t the only business to close its doors. Huda’s previous employer, an agricultural import-export company, had resorted to paying her with sacks of almonds or pistachios from shipments abandoned in their warehouse. Unfortunately, Huda couldn’t pay her bills with rancid nuts. Then a cousin who worked as a driver at the German embassy called. He’d heard through the gossipy driver grapevine that the Australians down the road needed a secretary with good English and

typing speed of eighty words per minute. When he mentioned the salary, Huda's eyes bulged. She'd swallowed her reservations about working with foreigners. Not only would this cover their debts, the salary was more than her and Abdul Amir's former paychecks combined.

"The staff at the embassy are nice people," she scolded Abdul Amir. "They're ordinary people. Like us."

"Everyone knows, Australia is nothing but America's obedient lapdog."

"You can't judge people by the actions of their—" Huda broke off as the six o'clock anthem blared from the television. The president rode across the screen in an army jeep. Abdul Amir grabbed the remote and flicked to the next channel. From a gilded balcony, the president saluted a battalion of goose-stepping troops. He growled and tossed the remote back onto the couch.

"I fear that people will question your loyalty." His words were barely audible above the television, but like most sensible people, they'd long ago grown accustomed to reading lips, filling in blanks, talking in code.

"I love my country," whispered Huda. "You know that."

"It is not what I know that matters," he muttered. "I'm going to the coffee shop."

"What about dinner?"

He had shrugged, grabbed his car keys, and stormed off, leaving her to seek comfort in a box of nougat, unaware that the mukhabarat were about to descend upon their home.

Huda rolled onto her side and checked the clock on the bedside. She wondered, Was Khalid asleep? Or was he huddled under his faded Star Wars sheets, shining his flashlight on a dog-eared copy of *Harry Potter*? The boy wanted nothing more than to enroll in the Hogwarts Academy. Pity he did not show the same enthusiasm for study in real life.

Huda's ears pricked up at the familiar rattle of Abdul Amir's

Corolla station wagon turning into their street. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and into a pair of fluffy pink slippers. A Mother's Day gift from Khalid three years ago, they were worn at the heels. In the hallway, she paused and stuck her head into his bedroom. Khalid was curled up like a snail. She continued to the front door, unlocked the dead bolts, and released the chain.

Outside, dry leaves whispered in the darkness. Abdul Amir's voice boomed from the far side of the gate.

"What the hell? Have you locked me out of my own home, woman?"

"The lock was broken." As Huda pried open the gate, she could smell the burnt molasses of *nargilah* smoke embedded in her husband's hair and clothes. "I had to replace it."

"How on earth did it break?" Abdul Amir waved his hands about like an angry prophet scolding his flock. "Do I need to punish Khalid again?"

"Please, my dear, be quiet." Huda peeked along the potholed street. Tall walls stretched in both directions, draped in flowering bougainvillea or fragrant jasmine. All were topped with metal spikes or shards of broken glass. "I'll explain everything—in the backyard."

Abdul Amir stiffened.

"The backyard?" he whispered. His hands were still raised, but now he looked less a righteous prophet and more like the victim of a stickup.

"That would be best," Huda murmured nervously.

Like his wife before him, Abdul Amir scanned the street. The wind groaned, and grains of pale desert sand scratched against their cheeks.

A razor-thin moon hovered high over Huda's backyard. The flames of al-Dora still spiked the horizon, but the wind had begun to turn. Huda's nose wrinkled at the smell of burning gas. Abdul Amir stood on his toes and peered over the neighbor's fence. No

lamp glowed in their window. Their own house was dark and quiet too. Still, it was safer not to talk indoors—walls have ears, and so do teenage sons.

Abdul Amir and Huda huddled close.

“What did you tell them?” he whispered.

“There was nothing to tell,” said Huda. “I barely know the woman. If she stops by the office, we chat about the weather, small talk, that’s all. I mean, why would I go asking for trouble?”

Huda scanned the dim reaches of the garden: the orange and lemon trees, the vegetable patch in the corner, the wrought-iron swing seat that rocked back and forth on squeaky hinges. Abdul Amir raked his hands through his hair. In the moonlight, his fingers were pale as bone.

“What do you know about this woman?”

“Ally seems nice enough,” mumbled Huda. “But it can’t be long before she packs up and returns home. The heat and the sun always prove too much for the embassy wives.”

And the loneliness too, thought Huda. She remembered meeting Ally a month ago, at the end of her ten-hour drive from Jordan to Baghdad. The young woman had stumbled from the embassy Land Cruiser, hand raised to ward off the sun, legs wobbling like a sailor stepping ashore after months at sea.

“All the way here, I kept looking for white sand dunes and camel trains.” Ally laughed awkwardly. No one had the heart to tell her that was some other country.

Huda remembered when women like Ally had flocked to Baghdad: British nurses, French school teachers, and the plump wives of American oilmen. Tourists filled the cafés and strolled the banks of the Tigris. But nowadays, the expats were gone. So were the tour buses. The rail line to Istanbul was severed, and NATO jets shot down any planes that entered Iraqi airspace.

These days, only a handful of diplomats and United Nations workers ventured through the wide western desert to Baghdad. Very rarely did their wives join them—and like the exotic parrots at al-Ghazl pet market, the women soon went off their food,

drooped, and plucked out their own feathers. Then they disappeared back into the desert, pale-skinned gypsies in four-wheel-drive caravans, leaving nothing behind but a trail of dust and a perhaps forgotten sun hat. Eventually, their husbands were posted elsewhere and life resumed happily. At least, Huda assumed it was happily. It was almost impossible to stay in touch with those outside Iraq's borders. Unwise, even, to embark on such friendships in the first place.

"What is she like, this Ally?" Abdul Amir paced back and forth. "Is she one of those arrogant foreigners who knows nothing of history and believes we're all savages?"

Huda shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Will it be difficult to befriend her?"

The moon slid behind a cloud. Huda was glad of the darkness.

"I don't know," she lied. Ally wasn't standoffish at all, and Huda sensed it would be easy to draw her close.

Until this evening, Huda had thought she could handle the obligatory visits from the mukhabarat. She kept her answers brief but true and made it a rule to avoid gossip. She was only a secretary. She had nothing to hide. Besides, her Australian bosses weren't fools. They told their Iraqi staff only what they were happy for the government also to know. The rest they kept to themselves.

Huda remembered depositing her first embassy paycheck and how the bank clerk's eyes widened as he eyed her salary. His usual sneer disappeared. He called her *madam* for the first time, and asked if she'd like tea while he processed the check. She'd relished that moment far more than she cared to admit. Now, the strings attached to her job drew tight around her neck.

Abdul Amir stopped pacing back and forth across the lawn.

"Did Abu Issa offer you money?" he said.

"Money?" Huda frowned. "Of course not. No one gets rewarded for answering their questions."

"Let's be honest. They want more than that. Much more." He ripped a prickly sow thistle from the lawn. "I heard sometime they pay informants."

Huda tasted the sour gas from the refineries on her tongue.

“I am not an informant.”

“You wanted the embassy job.” Abdul Amir snorted. “You wanted to work with foreigners. Did you not consider there might be a price to pay?”

Huda had thought she was so smart, that she could type a few letters, take the foreigners’ money, and manage the mukhabarat too. She’d ignored the voice inside her whispering, *you’re playing with fire*. She searched her husband’s face. His eyes were nothing but shadows.

“Have I not paid enough already?” she asked.

CHAPTER 2



Rania ducked behind one of the ornate columns lining Mutanabbi Street, but not fast enough. On the opposite sidewalk, the old poet Adnan Nawab waved to her, like a fly fisherman casting a lure. Between them ran a river of books, some stacked on low tables, but most set out on cardboard on the ground. A gust of wind whistled off the Tigris and fluttered a million pages with its brackish sigh.

“Rania, my dear!” Adnan was thin as a child, but his voice still held the power to cut through the throng at Mutanabbi book market. “Will you join me for tea?”

Rania groaned quietly. She adored Adnan, but today she had no appetite for tea and gossip. Still, he’d spotted her, so she made her way from under the shaded balcony, past the great columns, and into the heat and commotion of the walking street.

“I’m coming, Professor,” she cried.

She clutched her bag tight—a backpack stuffed so full the zipper strained at the teeth—and squeezed past a stall stacked with almanacs, astronomical charts, and Korans bound in leather and engraved with jewel-toned inks. A vendor waved her toward an atlas with lands that existed only in memory: Rhodesia, Tangan-

yika, Transjordan. Beside him, young men squatted over college textbooks piled atop plastic sheets on the ground. Rania caught a glimpse of a dissected heart, pink arteries and blue veins laid out over two pages. She wondered, If she hunkered down beside them, might she unearth a diagram of the soul, its purple bruises and rotten patches properly dated and labeled? More important, would she find dog-eared instructions on how to remedy these maladies?

“Professor, what a blessing to see you,” said Rania as she reached the steps of a whitewashed café. The clank and whistle of kettles on a gas stove drifted through the open windows. “Then again, where else would I find our nation’s most esteemed poet, but at the door of Shahbandar café?”

“You are too kind,” he replied. “Especially to an old man who does nothing but waste his days rewriting the same line fifty different ways.”

Behind him, a group of middle-aged men passed a burbling *nargilah* pipe back and forth while noisily debating the merits of eighteenth-century novelists. Two young women in blue jeans sat quietly on a cushioned bench sipping sweet tea.

“I hear talk of a new exhibition at your gallery,” said Adnan.

“The German Cultural Center is sponsoring some young artists. The theme is peace.”

“Peace?” He raised a gray bristling eyebrow. “I hope the artists had good imaginations, because they could not draw from their own experience. Perhaps next time you can convince the Germans to hold a poetry exhibition. We could call it *The Gasbagging of Old Men*. What do you think of that?”

Despite herself, Rania grinned.

“It would be a fine thing, I’m sure.”

Adnan limped toward the café’s heavy doors, gesturing for her to join him.

“I’m afraid I can’t stop, Professor.”

The old man raised his ponderous brow again.

“No tea?”

Rania reddened. "I have an appointment."

Adnan snuck a glance at Rania's bulging backpack. A sigh of recognition escaped his wrinkled lips.

"I pray that your appointment goes well," he said. "After all, without you and your gallery, most of the Shahbandar's customers couldn't cobble together enough dinar for a single cup of tea."

"Well, I, uh . . ." Rania blushed again.

Sympathy clouded Adnan's rheumy eyes.

"You're not the first person who's had to sell off their books," he said gently. "There's no shame in it, my dear."

"I'm not sure my father would have agreed." Rania clutched her bag tighter. "I guess it's a mercy that he's not here to witness me trading off the last of his library for a handful of beans."

"Come now. With some shrewd bargaining, inshallah, you'll make enough to patch your roof. Or is it the hot water that needs fixing? I'm sure your father would want you comfortable."

"You think so?" Rania rubbed at an inch-long scar on her thumb, a smooth line the color of pearl. "My father always put honor higher than his daughter's wishes."

Adnan frowned, but his eyes were kind.

"Shall I come with you?"

Rania enveloped his knotted, arthritic hands in hers.

"Thank you, Professor, but I need to do this myself."

The bookseller hollered for his apprentice. His raspy call was muffled by ten thousand books. They were stuffed into bookcases that stretched fifteen feet to the wood-paneled ceiling, stacked on top of tables and packed in crates on the floor. More were jammed into windowsills where they blocked all but the sun's most determined rays. Dust motes twirled beneath a neglected chandelier.

"That boy is never to be found when I need him." The bookseller pushed his chair away from his desk. "Please, relax while I fetch more tea to mark our deal."

Rania waited in silence as he waddled from his musty den. *He's probably gone out back to dance the dabke*, she thought morosely

as she tucked her payment into her pocket. Her nose twitched at the vanilla-and-mold scent of old glue, ink, and paper slowly decomposing.

A floorboard groaned behind her, on the far side of the bookseller's front door. Silence followed. Whispers. A gentle knock. A young woman inched through the doorway. Her long dark hair could have belonged to an Iraqi, but her skin was far too pale, like Snow White's.

"Is this al-Kitab bookstore?" the young woman said in halting Arabic.

A tall man slipped in behind her. From his freckles and sun-bleached hair, Rania would have guessed he was a surfer from California. But, of course, that was impossible. Americans had been banned from Iraq for over a decade.

"Come in," Rania decided to answer in English. Like many Iraqis of her class and era, she'd attended college in Britain and spoke with a slight Oxford accent. If that didn't work, she could always switch to her passable French. "You're at the right place."

At Rania's answer, the young woman's eyes lit up. They were an unusually vivid blue—the same color as Fatima's amulet, the charm used to ward off evil designs—and they seemed to double in size as they darted over the jumbled tabletops and scaled the library ladders resting in their rails.

"This is amazing." The young woman began to spin in a slow circle. "Your bookstore is even better than I imagined."

"I'm just a customer," said Rania. "The bookseller is out back."

"Oh, I see. For weeks I've been pestering my husband to take a day off and come to the market with me." The young woman reached for her husband's arm, but he was looking at his watch like he had somewhere else to be. "Isn't that right, Tom?"

"Umm . . ." Her husband glanced about, as if he might find his answer on the shelves. A brief spark of irritation flashed in the young woman's eyes.

"I'm Ally," She extended her hand. "And this is my husband, Tom Wilson."

“Rania Mansour,” she replied.

Once the introductions were done, the young woman’s gaze returned to the groaning shelves.

“The market out there—so many books, so beautiful, in every language you could imagine.” Ally shook her head in wonder. “And these old shops like al-Kitab, tucked away in the arcades. I feel like I’ve slipped down the proverbial rabbit hole. Is Mutanabbi a world heritage site? It should be. I wonder—” Ally broke off and clapped her hands over her mouth. “Sorry, I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

“Not at all.” Rania chuckled. The young woman was a breath of fresh air. “I remember feeling the same way when I visited the Serpentine Galleries in London for the first time. I was a student at the Royal College of Art back then. It must be close to twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years? How can that be?” said Ally. “You don’t look so much older than me, and I’m only twenty-seven.”

“Twenty-seven? Really?” Rania peered at her from the corner of her eye. She wondered, Was it a childhood free from desert winds that kept Ally looking so young? Or was it that grief had not yet pinched her lips or reddened her eyes? Rania felt a stab of envy. In Iraq, no one neared three decades and remained so untouched.

“What brings you to Baghdad, Ally?”

Before she could answer, Tom leaned forward.

“I’m the deputy ambassador at the Australian embassy.”

“The Australian embassy? Then you might know—” Rania broke off. A decade had passed since she last spoke with Huda. Why on earth was she thinking of her now?

Of course Rania’s mother, the *sheikha*, kept her apprised of happenings among the tribe. Births, deaths, marriages, and successes like Huda’s appointment as an embassy secretary were all relayed along the scratchy telephone line from Basra. And if she was really honest, Huda had been in and out of her thoughts ever since she began packing up her father’s books for sale.

When they were young, the two of them spent hours flipping

through her father's leather-bound story collections—and substituting themselves as the heroes. The fine woven rug on the library floor was transformed into Aladdin's carpet at least a hundred times. In those moments, they were able to cast off the rigid roles they'd been born into—Rania the sheikh's obedient daughter, Huda the scrappy village girl—sharing secrets and dreams they knew others would scoff at. They thought they'd ride that magical carpet forever, closer than teeth and tongue.

But all the fabled enemies they'd fought—the sea serpents vanquished, the forty thieves outwitted—weren't enough to prepare them for what was to come. Real life in Iraq was far more perilous than a storybook monster. And their friendship was one of its many casualties. Rania eyed her empty backpack and took a deep breath. Like her father's precious book collection, Huda belonged to the past. No matter what she wished, neither could be reclaimed.

"When did you arrive in Baghdad?" she asked Tom and Ally, fixing a smile on her lips. "I hope you're enjoying our city."

"We arrived about a month ago, and I'm afraid it's been non-stop work since then." Tom threw his wife an apologetic glance. "I'd probably be at the embassy now if Ally hadn't insisted I take the afternoon off."

"I've wanted to visit Mutanabbi market ever since I first saw it on an old postcard. I would've come earlier, on my own, but I wasn't sure if I should." Ally pulled a square of black silk from her handbag. "I've been wearing this out in the market. But I see you're here without a male escort or a head scarf."

"There's no need for a scarf in Baghdad," said Rania. "But I can see how the market might be a little intimidating for a foreigner on her own."

Ally glanced up, and Rania thought she saw a touch of her own mournful nostalgia reflected in those cobalt eyes. In a blink, it was gone. If Ally had regrets, she knew how to hide them. Foreigners and Iraqis, Rania thought, they weren't so different underneath.

“You obviously appreciate fine books,” said Rania. “Are you interested in other art forms? I have a gallery; it’s nothing fancy, but we have an exhibition at the moment sponsored by the German Cultural Center. They are having a gathering next week, some drinks and so on in the garden. I would be honored if you came.”

She slipped a business card from her pocket and handed it over. A door opened at the back of the shop. The bookseller emerged and squeezed past a column of encyclopedias. A pimply teenager trailed behind him, carrying a tray of steaming tea. The bookseller spotted the two foreigners. Within seconds, he had a tea glass in Ally’s hand and another in Tom’s. Rania slipped her empty bag behind her back.

“I regret I must be going,” she said.

“Please stay.” The bookseller’s eyes did not leave the foreigners, not even for a moment. “Have some more tea.”

Rania emerged from the darkness of the narrow stairwell and found Adnan Nawab waiting on the sidewalk. A young boy skipped past them with a foot-long block of ice balanced on his shoulder. Only a thin T-shirt and a scrap of cardboard separated the dripping cargo from his skin.

“The boy’s errand is not so bad on a day like today.” The old man wiped his forehead. “I could do with something icy myself. If you don’t feel like tea, Rania, how about a juice?”

Rania nodded, and the two of them made their way to nearby Rashid Street. They waited side by side in the shade of a crumbling portico while a red double-decker bus rumbled past, then they dashed through the traffic and claimed a table outside a small juice bar. Two doors down, on the steps of a boarded-up bank, a shoe shine boy was doing brisk trade, his brushes flying back and forth. A wrinkled man shuffled by, carrying a pole slung with bagel-like rings of sesame-seed *simit*.

“I saw a couple of foreigners climb the stairs after you,” remarked Adnan. “Did you meet them?”

“Let’s pray the bookseller leaves a few coins in their pockets, because I invited the young woman to visit my gallery.” She swirled her juice. “With luck, she’ll buy a painting or two.”

“Here’s to that.” Adnan raised his glass in a toast.

Rania clinked her glass against his.

“So, how is your daughter?” said Adnan. “I heard you’d sent her to stay with your mother. I’m sure she misses you.”

Rania rolled her eyes.

“Hanan is a fourteen-year-old girl—she does not miss her mother. Her grandmother drives her from the farmhouse into Basra city every weekend for shopping and ice cream. The rest of the time she keeps her busy by taking her on the rounds out to the villages. There are many new babies, and the congratulatory visits must be made. Not that Hanan likes it. I called her last night, and believe me, she was not shy about letting me know I’d ruined her life.”

Rania sighed. She’d spent forty-five minutes, dialing and re-dialing, before she got a working phone line to Basra.

“I’m dying stuck down here,” Hanan had moaned to her. “The DVD player is broken. And Grandma expects me to join her while she visits every new baby in the province.”

“It’s not every baby. And it’s only a few villages. Count yourself lucky. In my day, our tribe was bigger, and I had to do twice as many visits.”

“It’s not fair. I miss my friends in Baghdad.”

“Come on, it’s not so bad.”

“All these years I had to listen to you complain about how Grandma would take off to Baghdad for weeks on end, and pack you off to stay on the farm.” Static crackled down the line. “But it’s fine for you to do it to me?”

Phone pressed to her ear, Rania stared at the kitchen ceiling where water stains formed a map of a derelict world.

“It’s hardly the same,” she replied crisply. “Your grandmother went to Baghdad to go water-skiing and wear miniskirts. I’m having no such fun. Anyway, don’t fret. Basra has a very nice

high school. When the school year starts, you'll make some new friends."

"I don't want new friends. I want to come home. I want to go swimming with Ghada and Ban at the Alwiyah Club."

"All in good time, my dear." Rania winced, knowing eventually she'd have to admit to Hanan that she could no longer afford the club's membership fee.

The phone line sizzled like fat in a pan.

"Hello? Hanan? Can you hear me?"

She gripped the phone tight.

"*Habibtee*, are you there?"

Static hissed.

"I love you!" Rania's words bounced off the kitchen walls and echoed in her ears.

Her chest had hurt when she hung up the phone, from love, but also from a strange premonition that time was fast running out, that events were slipping out of her control. Was it the impending sale of her father's books, the fact that Hanan was tuning into a young woman, or something more? Rania didn't know, but she'd tossed and turned all night.

Out on Rashid Street, another double-decker swooshed by, nudging her back to the present.

"I'm sure your daughter misses those fancy cafés on Arasat Street." Adnan set down his glass. "Did you know there's a new restaurant with an outdoor pool and little cabanas with silk cushions? At night, you can see the blue water glowing from the footpath. I couldn't afford a thimble of tea in a place like that, but I ended up idling on the curb, a little beggar boy beside me, both of us unable to tear our eyes away."

Adnan glanced over his shoulder. The boy at the juice counter was slicing oranges. Adnan scanned the busy sidewalk, then leaned in close.

"I was outside the restaurant for just a few minutes." He lowered his voice. "Then the yellow Ferrari pulled up by the curb."

Rania's juice suddenly tasted sour. She pushed her glass away. Adnan pressed his lips together in a grimace.

"You were right to send Hanan away. If I had a teenage daughter, I would do the same."

Rania's chest constricted, just like it had at the end of her phone call with Hanan.

"Sometimes, I fear even Basra is not far enough."

"I imagine you heard that Madam al-Houri passed away last week. She stopped eating. At the end she would not even take water." Adnan hunched over the table. "She never recovered from the shock, you know. To have your daughter taken—from her very own wedding banquet—and then defiled in the most offensive way. It is incomprehensible."

"Uday Hussein is the spawn of the devil," whispered Rania. "He must shock even his own father. And who would have dreamed that was possible?"

A teenage hawker strolled the sidewalk, towing a flock of helium balloons tethered to a shepherd's hook. Rania and Adnan fell silent as he passed by. On the far side of the street, near the entrance to Mutanabbi market, a man whistled: a loud, looping note full of lechery. Heads turned. A street urchin cried, "I love you, baby!"

The balloon vendor loped across the street, toward the commotion. Rania spotted Tom Wilson, scowling, hands jammed on his hips. Behind him, Ally fumbled through her pockets. A silk scarf unfurled in her hands like a black flag. She draped it over her hair. A man next to her puckered his lips and made kissy faces.

"You see this disgrace?" said Rania. "What is wrong with the men of today?"

"I blame the cinema and the television." Adnan scowled. "Have you seen the posters outside the movie house on Sadoun Street? They make it look like Western women will lie down with anyone, anytime. Too many of our foolish young men believe that's true."

They watched the two Australians climb into a taxi and motor away.

“Ally must be a brave girl to follow her husband here.” Rania fished a pack of cigarettes from her pocket. “Or foolish. Perhaps a bit of both.”

Adnan eyed her quizzically.

“Would you not have followed your husband? Allah protect his soul.”

“Hashim has been dead fifteen years,” she mumbled, and pulled a cigarette lighter from her pocket. “Sometimes I wonder, if not for his photographs, would I be able to remember his face?”

“Don’t feel guilty, my dear. Living a full life, not dwelling in sorrow, that’s the best way to honor the dead.”

Rania lit her cigarette absentmindedly. She’d been married less than a year when Hashim’s jet was shot down during a bombing run over Tehran. She was strolling in the garden when the news arrived. Her mother-in-law’s wail escaped through the open window of the kitchen and lifted the birds from the trees.

For Rania, that moment was preserved like an insect caught in amber. But most of her memories were blurry—or trivial—like her distinct recollection of the slurping noise Hashim made while eating fried eggs. Theirs had been a traditional union, matchmade by their parents, but it was far from the barbaric arrangement her fellow students at college in Britain slyly questioned her about. They imagined Iraqi girls like Rania were sold off in chains to old, ugly strangers, when in fact that was far from the truth.

Rania’s and Hashim’s families were old friends, and the two of them had played together as children, although that stopped once they neared puberty. The daughter of a sheikh, Rania had plenty of handsome, well-connected suitors, but she knew Hashim would treat her kindly, and, importantly, so would her future parents-in-law. When they got engaged, she didn’t love him in the romantic sense favored by Hollywood. Nor did she expect to. But she was confident that given time, she would grow to love her husband, just as her mother had, and her grandmother before her.

Rania and Hashim only had a few months to adjust to their new life together. They butted heads on occasion, but once the

bedroom lights dimmed, they were always eager to make up. When Hashim was called up to fight in the war with Iran, Rania was six weeks pregnant. Five months later, she mourned his death. She grieved sincerely, as a wife should, struggling to accept that Hashim would never see his daughter. And Hanan would never know her father. But as the years passed, she began secretly to wonder, what would her life have been like if she had remained married?

Like Rania's father, Hashim had been a traditional man. He would have demanded final say over all their important decisions. Would he have allowed her to move away from his family home and to open a gallery in Baghdad? That was unlikely. She'd tried many times to imagine her life if Hashim had lived, but she simply couldn't picture the details, or how it would have flowed from morning to night, from breakfast to supper, year after year. Sometimes when she talked of her marriage, it felt like someone else's story. She was just mouthing the words.

An old woman hobbled by with a roll of newspapers tucked under her arm. Rania wondered, How many widows felt the same? Were their memories as thin as hers? Charcoal sketches, a line here, a shadow there? Rania had resisted all offers to marry again and managed to build a good life for herself and her daughter. At least she had, until war and sanctions destroyed the flow of visitors to her art gallery.

She sucked on her cigarette and thought of the book merchant stroking his pudgy fingers over the last vestiges of her father's library. She glanced at her empty bag and winced. When she handed the final book over, the calfskin binding had felt as warm as her own flesh.

CHAPTER 3



The window behind Ally's desk squealed as she pried it open, startling a trio of pigeons from the palm tree in her courtyard. In a flurry of wings, they flapped toward a traffic circle dominated by a hand-painted billboard of Saddam Hussein chatting on an old-fashioned rotary telephone. With rosy cheeks and a twinkle in his eye, he looked like a kindly uncle catching up with his favorite nephew. More likely, Ally thought, he was ordering someone's execution.

Ally hoped the squawking birds might pause, perch on the billboard, and deposit a few pasty droppings on the dictator's mustache. The birds knew better. They flew on through the bright blue sky, past tall gates, and squat, sand-colored shops, in the direction of the Tigris River. As Ally eyed the billboard, a familiar *clang-clink-clang* drifted through the bars on the window. It was the neighborhood gas vendor—a skinny boy, about ten years old—beating a scrap of pipe against one of the gas canisters stacked in his sea-blue donkey cart. He followed this route every morning, banging out a melody to advertise his wares. In the past month Ally had learned his tune by heart.

When the peals faded, Ally sat down at the desk and picked up a yellowed postcard of Mutanabbi book market. On the back, a scrawl of faded ink told of parties and picnics by the river. There was a joke about a humorless boss, a pledge to write again soon, and three kisses marked XXX. Like the gas vendor's tune, Ally knew it by heart. It was written by her mother, Bridget, on June 12, 1970, and addressed to her father, Robert. Ally wondered, Did she already suspect her pen pal would one day become her husband?

Back then, Western nurses like her mom were paid handsomely to work in Baghdad. Inevitably some found the heat, and their homesickness, too much to bear. Not Bridget. *Who would have guessed that Baghdad possesses the world's biggest, bluest, most flawless sky? It's paradise!*

Ally liked to picture her mom as a female Marco Polo, adventuring in foreign lands. But cancer claimed Bridget early, before she could share her daring exploits with her daughter. Those untold stories had gnawed a hungry hole in Ally. She raised her eyes to the enormous expanse of forget-me-not blue outside her window and imagined her mother doing the same. The ache inside her eased, just a little. For a moment, she could almost understand how someone might mistake it for paradise.

Now that Ally was seated, only Saddam's eyes were visible, peering over the courtyard wall topped with glittering shards of glass. She poked her tongue out at him, then flipped open her laptop. In the corner of the screen, the Internet Explorer icon sulked uselessly—its connection to the outside world severed by Saddam's censors.

She clicked on Microsoft Word. Three paragraphs stared back at her—the measly sum of all she'd produced yesterday. She re-read her description of the boy on the donkey cart, his song traveling through the streets like the jingle from some dystopian Mister Softee truck. She hated every sentence. Stuffed full of adjectives, starved of plot.

Ally straightened her shoulders and tapped at the keyboard. A few minutes later, she stopped, then hit the delete key. The cursor blinked, mocking her. She tapped out another line, frowned, and erased the sentence. The cursor moved forward, then reversed again, like a backhoe crushing her words into flat, lifeless rubble.

Ally sighed at the wreckage on-screen. Back in Australia, Tom had warned her that contrary to popular belief, the biggest danger in Baghdad was dying of boredom. Ally thought she'd keep herself busy writing a book that retraced her mother's trailblazing path. Turns out that was easier said than done. Her mother's apartment building had been torn down, her favorite riverside café went up in flames ten years ago, and the hospital where she worked seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Ally eyed a framed photo on her desk, of her mother laughing with the Tigris rippling behind her. She'd discovered the photo and the postcards only a few months ago, at her father's home, a week after his funeral. She'd been sorting through his closet, folding suits for the thrift shop, breathing in the odor of his Old Spice and fighting off tears, when she found a manila envelope tucked on a high shelf. She lifted the flap. The photo of her mother stared back.

Ally's heart had lurched like a runaway car. She hadn't seen the picture in decades, not since she was five years old. Yet somehow, she remembered every detail: the joyful wrinkles at the edge of her mother's eyes, the sun gleaming on her dark hair. The wind had pushed a long strand across her face, and she'd raised her hand to pull it away, almost like she was waving.

Last time Ally saw the photo, it had been above the fireplace in a small row house in Boston—the house where her mother died. To her lasting shame, Ally had always felt closer to the smiling young woman on the mantel than to the woman being consumed by cancer in a darkened bedroom. At some point during her mother's illness, Ally convinced herself that there'd been some mistake. How could the woman in the photo—her mother—be

the same melancholy patient who smelled of cold sweat and despair?

Sometimes, Ally's mother would call for her, extend her twiggy, trembling fingers, and stroke her daughter's cheek. Ally would hold her breath, waiting for the chance to slink off to the living room, where she'd stare doggedly at the photo of the woman by the river, her real mother, smiling, with the wind in her hair. Where was she going? Ally wondered. Could she come too?

When her mother died, her father packed them up and moved them to Australia to be near his parents. Somewhere along the way, the photo vanished. When she asked about it, her father winced.

"It must have gotten lost." His voice cracked. "Now, go outside and play."

He looked so pained that eventually Ally stopped asking about the photo. Or pretty much anything to do with her mother. If she did, her father's shoulders would crumple, and soon he'd sidle to the fridge, pull out a beer and start drinking. She'd find him at four o'clock in the morning, passed out on the couch, David Bowie turning circles on the record player, empty beer bottles on the floor.

Ally learned not to ask questions about her mother, but she didn't forget the image of her by the river, her long, shining hair loose in the breeze. More than twenty years later, Ally sank to the floor of her father's bedroom and held that photo close.

Her father's front door creaked. Footsteps clomped down the hall.

"Anyone home?" called Tom.

"In here," she called back.

"You're not going to believe what happened at work—" Tom stopped short at the sight of Ally crouched by the closet.

"Oh, babe." He squatted down and hugged her. "You shouldn't be doing this alone." He squeezed her tighter. "Do you want to go home and I'll finish this?"

Ally shook her head and passed him the photo.

"That's your mom, right? She looks so happy." He flipped

the photo over and read the inscription: *Tigris River, Baghdad*. Abruptly, Tom sat back on his heels.

“That’s so weird,” he said.

“What’s weird?”

Tom took a deep breath.

“I got offered a deputy ambassadorship today.”

“Deputy ambassador?” Ally gasped. “That’s a huge promotion. Where?”

Tom handed back the photo.

“Baghdad,” he said. “They want me to go to Baghdad.”

In that moment, time froze. Packing up her father’s belongings, Ally had never felt so unmoored, adrift without compass. Now, a spark of hope kindled in her chest. It was as if her mother’s ghost had risen, tapped her daughter on the shoulder, and said, *Follow me*.

With a loud crack, the power went out. The air conditioner wheezed to a halt. Ally wondered how long the cut would last. Two hours? Three? She eyed the phone on her desk. It was a clunky rotary dial, like the one Saddam used on the billboard out front. She pressed the phone to her ear. Silence. She tapped the switch hook. Nothing.

Ally entered the number for the embassy anyway, hoping that Tom might find time in his hectic schedule to eat lunch with her. After each number, the dial click-click-clacked back to its starting point. The line crackled. A woman’s voice emerged, thin as fog. A man replied, his voice even more distant, rising and falling in a sea of static.

“Hello?” said Ally. “Hello?”

The woman didn’t answer. Neither did the man. Their voices grew fainter until finally they vanished altogether. A crossed line? Maybe. The head of embassy security had warned that all their phones were tapped. The embassy was sure to be bugged, he said, and their home too. If Tom and Ally wanted to talk privately, he said they should do it in their garden or outside in the street, away

from televisions, radios, air conditioners, even light fixtures—anything that might provide a power source for tiny cameras and hidden microphones.

Ally put down the phone and flicked idly through a pile of news reports she'd printed up during her last visit to the embassy. Saddam had long ago barred foreign journalists from Iraq. International newspapers, foreign television, and radio were banned too. So Ally had to use the embassy's secure server to keep track of the news.

Ironically, Ally used to be a journalist herself, covering drug busts, burglaries, and the occasional homicide for the *Canberra Herald*. But then, a month before her father died, Rupert Murdoch's lieutenants retrenched her along with a third of the newsroom. She remembered she'd been futilely scouring the job adverts when Tom brought home their Iraqi visa applications.

"That's it?" Ally had eyed the flimsy document. "Just one page of questions?"

"Count yourself lucky," said Tom. "Mine was nine pages long. I'm worried they'll want a cavity search too."

"*Dependent spouse?*" Ally frowned at the form. "That's my official title?"

Tom raised his hands.

"You can always change your mind."

Ally smoothed the document with her palm and began to fill in the blanks. At the box marked "occupation," she paused and chewed the end of her pen.

"Housewife," she printed.

Tom peered over her shoulder. "Housewife? Really?"

"It asks only for my current occupation, not my whole résumé."

After that, all that remained was the citizenship box. She adjusted her grip on the pen, took a breath, and printed, "Australian." It wasn't exactly a lie. The form didn't ask if she had dual nationality, so she told herself there was no need to mention she was an American citizen too, thanks to her mother. She signed the

document quickly, a rushed signature that already looked like it belonged to someone else.

Tom eyed the form like it was Eve's ruinous apple.

"I sincerely doubt they'll give you a visa."

"You underestimate the blinding power of misogyny," said Ally. "I bet those Iraqi bureaucrats won't check anything—not once they see the word *housewife*."

It turned out, Ally was right. But that was little comfort as she sat in her lonely Baghdad house, scanning some other journalist's work. She glanced through the barred window. The sky's friendly forget-me-not glow had vanished, replaced by harsh rays that bleached all the color from the garden. Nothing moved, not a single leaf or a wisp of wind. The heat silenced even the birds. Saddam's coal-black eyes leered over the stucco wall. Ally could almost feel her world shrinking. Soon, she feared, it would fit into a box on her lying visa form.

Ally eyed her reflection in the mirror by the front door and scraped her long dark hair into a bun. Embassy security had assured her that as a *guest of the state*, no one would dare lay a hand on her, that she could walk safely in the embassy district and wear her hair however she chose. Nonetheless, Ally found that left loose, her hair transformed into a pirate's flag that attracted all sorts of miscreants, curses, and lewd invitations. "*Russee, Russee*," men cried, mistaking her for an Eastern bloc prostitute.

Screw it, Ally whispered to her reflection, *words can't hurt*. The catcalls of the street were no worse than solitary confinement inside her rented home of marble and concrete. She wrapped a thin cotton scarf around her neck, checked the bulging contents of her handbag, then fished out her keys and set to work on the front door. She turned three locks, pulled aside a bolt, and unlatched a chain, then heaved open the door.

Heat slapped Ally's face. She stumbled past a bed of thorny rosebushes as Ghassan, their security guard, shuffled from his hut

by the gate. His gray hair was shaved close to his skull. He stared at Ally's feet, revealing a shiny bald patch on top of his scalp.

"Where do you go, madam?"

Ally suppressed a frown. She hated being called madam. But no matter how often she asked, Ghassan couldn't bring himself to use her name.

"I'm going for a walk, Ghassan."

"Walk? To where, madam?"

"The embassy."

"You must call them first. They will send a driver."

"The phone isn't working."

"Then I will get a taxi." Ghassan headed for the gate.

"No, don't," said Ally quickly. She might be safe out on the street, where the regime was keeping watch. The backseat of a stranger's car was another matter. "No taxis."

"But, madam, you can't—"

"I need the exercise." She cut him off. They'd had this conversation many times before. "I'm going for a walk."

Ghassan positioned himself between Ally and the tall metal gate. His eyes skittered briefly across her face, then returned to the driveway. She stepped forward.

"I'm leaving now."

She took another step, wielding her strange foreign femaleness like a force field and compelling Ghassan to retreat. He grumbled under his breath and pushed open the gate. Outside, a knot of plastic bags somersaulted through the traffic circle like a tumbleweed at high noon. High above, golden dates dangled from palm trees. Others rotted in treacherous heaps on the sidewalk.

Ally tugged her scarf above her collar and strode toward a set of traffic lights. They flashed amber. On and off. On and off. No one ever came to fix them, so they shone amber every day, never indicating whether to proceed or to stop, only urging caution, endless caution.

Unlike the teeming market of Mutanabbi, most of the businesses in Ally's neighborhood didn't open until the cool of the

evening, so she was alone on the sidewalk, except for a woman wrapped in a black abaya selling newspapers by the traffic lights. A hoot of laughter echoed through the warm air. The newspaper vendor's three-year-old son slipped from the shadows of a cobbled alley and made a beeline straight to Ally.

"As-salaam alaikum." She squatted at eye level with boy. "How are you, Mohammad?"

Mohammad immediately launched into their customary game of peekaboo mixed with silly faces. Ally crossed her eyes and flapped the corners of her ears. Mohammad cackled and did the same. After a few minutes, Ally pretended to steal Mohammad's nose, returned it to him, and continued on.

At the spot where the newspaper vendor stored her meager supplies, Ally paused and opened her handbag. She removed a plastic bag containing canned tuna, crayons, and a coloring book, and set it next to the newspapers. She continued past a pair of carpet shops, a tired photography studio, and a juice bar. A row of public-housing blocks loomed ahead, the same mustard hue as the desert that lapped at the city's hem. On pocket-size landings, laundry roasted on lines, socks and undershirts stiff as kindling. A black Oldsmobile cruised past the towers. The wind carried the throb of its engine toward her. The sound held no urgency: the driver had time on his hands.

Ally pulled her scarf higher. On the far side of the median strip, the Oldsmobile slowed to a crawl. Two thick-necked men with caterpillar brows and matching mustaches eyed her through its tinted glass. The passenger rolled down his window. Guttural snatches drifted across the bitumen. The words weren't listed in any of the Arabic textbooks Ally studied every morning, but she understood their intent. They were forbidden words, words wrapped in spittle, words that rattled in throats.

Muttering under her breath, Ally ignored the catcalls and plowed her gaze into the sidewalk. Eventually, the driver gave up, pressed his foot on the gas, and accelerated away. As soon as the car disappeared past the carpet shops, she pulled her scarf all the

way over her hair and skittered down a side street lined with well-tended homes.

The quiet street was scented with lavender from a hidden garden, and Ally tried to flush the adrenaline from her system with a couple of deep breaths. She wondered if her mother had been dogged by sleazeballs too. Her postcards never mentioned it. And while her old photos occasionally featured women cloaked in black robes, most of her Iraqi friends wore platform boots, flared pants, and even miniskirts.

The wind pulled Ally's scarf tight around her neck, then eight cylinders growled low in her ear. The Oldsmobile motored around the corner in front of her, as if it had been lying in wait. A mix of a yelp and a groan fled Ally's lips. Behind the windshield, the men threw their heads back and laughed, baring white teeth and fleshy tongues.

Ally took a deep breath, then bolted straight toward the car. The men's mouths opened in surprise. At the last moment, she veered sharp left into the street housing the embassy. Her sandals slapped loudly against the sidewalk, but the noise failed to drown out the obscenities spewing from the passenger's window.

The Oldsmobile drew closer. Ally could hear twigs snapping beneath its tires. She spotted the Australian flag. Moments later, an embassy guard strode out to the middle of the street.

"Madam Ally?" he called. "Are you okay?"

She shot an anxious glance over her shoulder. There was nothing but anonymous walls and high gates, and the throb of a V-8 engine lingering in the air.

Tom paced in front of his desk, clutching his blond hair like he was going to tear it out.

"I know security says it's safe to wander about, and that might be the case for me and the other blokes on staff, but certainly not for you. We need to hire you a driver. No more excuses."

Ally slumped on a cushioned bench by the door.

“Okay, you’re right.” She wiped sweat from her lip. “Catcalls I can handle, but not this.”

Tom stopped pacing.

“So you finally agree, we’ll get you a driver?”

“He’s got to have an ordinary car, nothing fancy.” Ally scowled at the floor. “I don’t want to look like a pampered princess riding around in a limousine.”

“If you want a rust bucket, I’m fine with that.” Tom flicked through his desktop calendar. “But let’s try to hire someone before I leave on Friday. I’ll be up north for a week.”

Ally sat up straight.

“Did my travel permit come through? Can I come this time?”

“I called the Ministry of Interior, and they said your application was still being processed. Sorry, babe.”

“But we sent it in ages ago.” Ally grabbed a cushion like she was going to throttle it. “How come your permits only take a day or two to get approved?”

“Because I am embassy staff, carrying out official business.” Tom looked up from his calendar. His tone softened. “I don’t blame you for feeling frustrated. Maybe you’d be better off some place where you’re free to do your own thing.”

“We’ve only been married six months. What happened to ‘till death do us part’?”

“Plenty of embassy families live apart at times.” Tom’s freckled brow wrinkled. “Why don’t you look for an apartment in Jordan? It’s not so far away, and there’ll be other diplomat wives to keep you company.”

“Kill me now.” Ally wrapped her hands around her neck and pretended to choke. “I met a bunch of those women in Amman. I thought they’d be cool and smart. Instead, they spent the whole time comparing manicures and which spa gave the best massage with Dead Sea mud. And then they complained about their nannies.”

Ally twisted her wedding ring around her finger. She didn’t

doubt that Tom loved her, but she wondered if he secretly wanted her gone. Then he wouldn't have to feel guilty about staying late at work, seven days a week, like the rest of his colleagues. At thirty-four, he was young for a deputy ambassador. He felt he had something to prove, so he worked harder, and longer hours, than everyone else.

Knuckles rapped against the door. Huda entered with a tray of coffee and water. Ally wiped her flushed, sweaty face and clambered off the bench.

"Huda, I'm glad you're here. Please, tell me the truth." She motioned to her long skirt and black T-shirt. "Am I dressed okay? Should I be more covered up?"

"You are dressed just fine." Huda gestured for her to take a sip of water.

"Honestly, do I need a head scarf?"

"Of course not." Huda patted her own hair. It was as dark and thick as Ally's but cut short in a bob and fixed with a crispy shell of hair spray. "This is Iraq, not Saudi Arabia. No woman is forced to wear the head scarf. Here at the embassy, only one of us wears the scarf. One with. Five without."

Ally scrutinized her own body for signs of wrongdoing. Her skirt skimmed her ankles, and her T-shirt was modest enough—not baggy, but not body-hugging either. She glanced at Huda. Her dark trousers sat tight on her hips, and her tailored blouse left her forearms exposed. Crimson toenails peeked from Huda's kitten-heeled pumps.

"Do you ever have any problems on the street?" asked Ally.

"Me? No, not at all." The Iraqi woman looked her up and down. "I do not see anything wrong with what you wear."

Tom blew on his coffee.

"Would you do us a favor, Huda?" he said. "Ally needs to hire a driver. Can you help?"

"I have one letter to translate, then I'd be happy to help," replied Huda. "By the way, you're due to meet the ambassador in a few minutes."

After Tom and Huda left, Ally finished her water, spread the flat cushions over the bench, and lay down. She tried to forget about the men in the Oldsmobile. As the air conditioner above her head hissed like a serpent, she tried to remember only a sky the color of forget-me-nots.

CHAPTER 4



“I told you, if you want me to read your coffee grounds, you must be calm.” Huda flipped open her notepad. “Besides, Mr. Tom would like us to concentrate on finding a driver.”

“I am calm.” Ally set her coffee cup down on Huda’s desk. “Honest.”

Huda raised a brow. The girl was like a camel unable to see its own hump.

“Come on.” Ally gestured at her wild hair, still damp with sweat. “Don’t I look like a woman who’d benefit from a little guidance from a higher power?”

As she spoke, Ally’s hands flew about like birds. Huda found her unfiltered energy hard to resist.

“Just a quick look?” said Ally. “What would it hurt?”

“Hurt?” echoed Huda.

Even though her colleagues always kept Ally at a safe distance, Huda used to believe it wouldn’t hurt to entertain the girl a little, to offer her a drink and a sympathetic ear. It wasn’t against the law. Not really. Now, she asked herself, how wrong could she have

been? Huda turned away and searched for a pen. Bryan Adams crooned from the cassette player wedged beside the phone, but for a change, his velvet voice provided no comfort. Huda's every move, every breath, felt false. Damn the mukhabarat.

"First, let's focus on a driver," she said, "and then I will look at the grounds."

Ally grinned.

"Do not expect too much," warned Huda. "I am not a performing dolphin."

"You mean 'performing seal'?"

"Is it not a dolphin that jumps through the hoops?"

"Well, yes," laughed Ally. "I guess you're right."

Huda jotted down a few notes on the new driver and sipped her steaming coffee. The cardamom-scented brew was thick and creamy, twice boiled as required, but a touch too bitter. The cook in the cafeteria was skimping on the sugar again.

"Have you ever had one of those dreams where you think you're flying? Well, these days I dream about driving." Ally chuckled ruefully. "Since I found out I'm not allowed a license, I wake up drooling at the idea of stomping on the gas."

Huda laughed, despite herself.

"And what about the driver's salary?"

"I'm happy to pay the going rate."

"And which day of the week shall the driver have free? A Muslim may want Friday. A Christian perhaps Saturday."

"He can have two days off, whatever days he likes."

"Whatever he likes?" Huda frowned. "Be careful, people will take advantage of you."

Ally blushed. The label of diplomat's wife made her seem older than her years, but Huda knew she was still young enough to believe the best of everyone. Pity needled her side. The mukhabarat didn't give a damn about youth. Or innocence.

Ally offered her cup for inspection. "I've finished my coffee."

Huda set aside her notepad.