

ALAA AL-BARKAWI



IN THE COUNTRY I LOVE



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I LOVE

A decorative arch with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, framing the title text.

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PEACHTREE
Teen



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To my family and to my country.

And to all the refugees searching for home—
wherever it may be.

Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim

In the name of Allah,
the Most Gracious
and the Most Merciful

DEAR READER,

I have always been fascinated by the relationship between home and violence.

I was born in a refugee prison camp on the outskirts of Saudi Arabia after my family was forcibly displaced from Iraq, alongside thousands of other Iraqi Shia Muslims, in the early nineties as a result of Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship and failed US foreign policy.

My young parents had to raise four small children in this camp, which was riddled with human rights abuses: torture, starvation, sexual violence, unlivable desert conditions, and much more. Thankfully, soon after I was born, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees chose to help my family escape the camp and resettle as refugees in the United States. This was a process based mostly on sheer luck.

Unfortunately, a few years later, two major events happened: 9/11, followed by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Some of my earliest memories are watching images of Iraq being bombed through our Arabic satellite TV. Bloodied bodies pulled from the rubble. Parents grieving their dead children. Buildings turned to ash.

Yet, in the US media, our people were not portrayed as victims, but instead as villains. Iraqis, and by extension other Arabs and Muslims, were viewed as a monolith for terrorism. Our language, our clothing, and our homeland were deemed as barbaric and extreme.

By the age of five, I learned not to tell people where I was from. We were already hated for being Muslim, but being Iraqi meant the target on our backs grew even bigger. I swallowed parts of my identity, afraid, even though we were the ones being perceived as dangerous.

Once again, a place that was supposed to be my family's refuge had become unsafe for us. But here we were, living in a country that was actively destroying our own.

I didn't know how to define home. How could it be America when we were told we didn't belong? How could it be Iraq when we weren't

even allowed to go back? Iraq, the place where most of my family still lived, was also the place my classmates' family members were being deployed, whether intentionally or not, to hurt people who looked just like me.

Home felt complicated and unknown. Most days, it still does.

The US invasion of Iraq left over one million Iraqis dead and millions more displaced. As a modern society, we have still not reconciled what it truly means to violate a people and their country with little to no accountability. Nor do we offer much visibility from the perspective of the victims. While there is a plethora of media about the invasion, it is almost always through the eyes of the military and veterans. For decades, Iraqis have been invaded, occupied, and killed, but there are rarely stories told for us and by us.

This is why, even after twenty years since the invasion and continued occupation, *In the Country I Love* has become one of the first young adult novels to feature Iraqi characters by an Iraqi author.

This book was written to bring awareness to the realities of Iraqis and Iraqi Americans in a post-9/11 world. It is also a story that centers Shia Muslims, a minority sect in Islam, whose practices are steeped in social justice but often misunderstood and demonized. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, Shias were targeted, imprisoned, and brutally murdered en masse. Because Shias have been historically ostracized by governments and attacked by extremist groups across the world (like ISIS), I wanted to share some of the practices and traditions that have been misinterpreted and underrepresented—Muharram, Laylat Ashura, and Arbaeen—hoping not only to shed light on the diversity of Muslim stories, but to show that Shia Muslims are just as Muslim as anyone else.

Although Iraqi and Shia representation in mainstream media is long overdue, this book does not encompass all the rich and diverse perspectives of those identities. It is simply a reflection of *my* perspective growing up with those identities in a post-9/11 world. The novel also

explores traditional cultural Iraqi family dynamics from the perspective of a community that did not have access to education and safety, and certainly won't represent every Iraqi family.

Since 9/11, there has been pressure on Arab and Muslim voices to be more palatable to Western audiences by letting go of tradition or religious practices—or for us to play the part of the perfect victim. Having to prove over and over that Arabs and Muslims are just as complex and flawed to those outside our communities is one of the most dehumanizing acts we can inflict upon ourselves. In writing and sharing this book, it is my goal to not succumb to this pressure; our stories deserve to be told with all the messy nuances that make us human. Due to the real-life events that inspired *In the Country I Love*, you can expect to read about heavy and oftentimes uncomfortable topics. Please take care of yourself and read the trigger warnings before you begin.

As you embark on Yassir's, Khaled's, and Kawther's journeys, you'll witness firsthand how imperfect each character is, and how the inevitable reality of violence and the idea of home can blur into one. While violence can obscure the idea of home, it is up to each character to find a way to extricate one idea from the other—or not—if they choose to. Some characters aren't brave enough to embrace their identities, just like I wasn't when I was younger, but some will fight their hardest for their truths to be heard—the way I am trying every day, starting with this book.

In the Country I Love offers the story of one small community's experience, but can be a reminder to all readers that with home, there is heartache, but there is also love, too. In our current political climate, we are collectively experiencing the frightening reality of violence defining our understanding of home, and what it means to fight against hate. It is not easy to be brave, but it is worth it to try.

With love,

ALAA AL-BARKAWI



SKY

Delicate whispers in the dark.
That's how I find the most interesting things.

The ones that are not supposed to be found. The creatures left behind. Their breaths rattling in the zephyr of my wind, praying that this moment will not be their last.

I heard the whimper first.

Before the crowd gathered at Twenty-First and Main, twilight and crimson lights illuminating their shocked faces. I heard it before the ambulance screamed down the street and swallowed the body—a boy—in one large bite.

Now, I am not all-seeing, nor am I all-knowing.

I can only see what the humans choose to expose to me. Bombs sweeping buildings clean, children hunting each other on playgrounds, men breaking promises down on one knee as they sputter meaningless words like *Will you marry me*.

I don't answer prayers, either. That is not my job.

Nor can I discuss secrets of the universe, although I do know many.

But I can tell you this: When that boy, face smeared with blood and dirt, whimpered, I found a shadow leaning over him. Then the shadow walked away. When the shadow returned, he brought with him the police and their sirens, and the onlookers whose hands covered their mouths in horror.

When the shadow leaned into the light as the cops began their questioning, I recognized his face. He was skinnier. A green military uniform no longer engulfed his body, but the grimace that bit the inside of his cheeks was the same. Years ago, when a dead little boy lay face down in the mud after a rainstorm in Baghdad, the shadow looked up at me and stared and stared and stared. By the time I stared back, he was already being dragged away by his superior officer to give a report.

I try not to pay attention to soldiers. There are too many of them. While many humans linger in my memory, the soldiers and their work haunt me most. If I tried to keep track of them all, I'd never rest.

However, they leave behind the delicate whispers I like to find.

The ones I like to follow.

The ones I like to soothe in their last moments, my warmth cupping their chins as they release their final breaths.

As I said, I am not all-seeing, nor am I all-knowing. But one day, when the earth has folded over and become obsolete, I will testify what the humans did to one another before they enter the hereafter.

I found the ambulance resting on the shoulder of a hospital curb in silence. But the body was gone. Yet I could hear the whimper still.

So I followed it.



1

YASSIR

FORTY-EIGHT DAYS BEFORE

On the eve of Imam Hussein's murder, Yassir Al-Azzawi watched the masjid fill wall to wall, and wondered where his mouthy best friend was among the chaos. Of course, he wouldn't be allowed to talk to Khaled even if he found him. So he observed the crowd in boredom, knees sinking into the stained salmon rug where Baba ordered him to sit.

At the masjid, even the walls grieved. Black satin was draped over every inch of the room, with glittering Arabic calligraphy looping brilliantly over the cloth. Splotches of fake blood dripped at the diacritics of the painted words to symbolize the sacrifice of Imam Hussein and the seventy-two companions who had accompanied him in battle over thirteen hundred years ago.

Umm al-Banin. Ya Abbas.

Most Arabic words had withered in Yassir's head. When he tried to resuscitate the language to speak it aloud, he never made the right sounds, but to his surprise, the names of Ahlul Bayt were still perfectly intact in his head.

“Here.”

Baba returned with two half-broken turbahs in his palms, the consequences of coming late on one of the most sacred nights of the year. Yassir grabbed the smaller rock and stared at Allah’s name engraved in the clay. His thumb lingered over the faded Arabic, but he stopped himself from tracing over it.

“You will stay here and pray. You will not speak to anyone. You will not move from this spot unless I tell you to. *Understood?*” Baba’s lips were an inch away from his ear, the scent of secondhand smoke heavy on the collar of his black dishdasha.

Yassir couldn’t keep his eyes from rolling. “Yes, Baba.”

Baba side-eyed Yassir’s rotting lemon-yellow hoodie, something he had done several times on the car ride from school. Yassir had foolishly thought he’d be driven straight home, where Mama’s cooking awaited to silence the miseries of the day while Yasmin made a mess like she always did, spitting up milk and stew onto his jeans.

But now he understood why Baba had been adamant this morning that Yassir wear his black sweatshirt. The one that now sat damp in his gym locker after Alex and Khaled had spilled beer all over it during lunch.

When Yassir had come home with a one-month-old who shared his DNA and the dimple in his left cheek earlier this year, well, he was lucky he had not yet been shipped away. But if Baba caught Yassir drinking again, a one-way ticket to Iraq would be in his hands the next morning, as promised. So Yassir had borrowed Alex’s smelly yellow hoodie and dealt with Baba’s disappointing stares. Stares he’d gotten used to long ago.

“Get up,” Baba commanded as the chaos of the room came to a standstill and men and children took their places for prayer. Yassir stood up and placed his hands over his ears before settling them down at his sides as salat al-maghrib commenced.

It had been 1,147 days since Yassir had made salat.

One thousand, one hundred and forty-seven days since reciting a meaningful “Allah is the greatest, most compassionate, most merciful” kind of prayer. He had been sandwiched between Baba and his older brother then, the scent of Ali’s strong sandalwood cologne seeping into the air as he lifted his hands to his ears, Baba’s voice commanding the next movement.

That day, Yassir had thought of Ayah’s face after each rak’ah, recalling the moment they’d been reunited on the first day of freshman year after years of separation, when hope and excitement had foolishly mixed in his stomach.

Allahu akbar.

The motions of worship were engraved in his muscle memory. The words he’d assumed were long forgotten slipped out beneath his breath. He lingered with his forehead on the turbah when he was supposed to. Stacked his feet after sujud.

Allahu akbar.

Yassir whispered it as each man lifted his forehead from the Persian rug. He whispered it when they put their hands together in dua and lifted them toward Mecca. He whispered it, the scent of rose water and boiled rice clinging to the air.

Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar.

Yassir opened his eyes as a harmony of prayers filled his ears. Everyone, including children as young as six, closed their eyes and asked Allah to make their dreams come true. To watch over their families. To get the bombs and corrupt government out of Iraq. Maybe even to lower their car payments, or something.

Tonight he wouldn’t even bother.

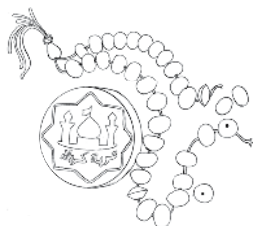
Despite what his parents believed, praying would not solve any of his problems. It hadn’t fixed a single thing in their lives before now, anyway.

The prayer ended, with several men extending their hands to Baba. When Baba smiled at the uncles, Yassir could see the worry deeply

lining his cheeks, where the dimple he and Ali had inherited met with a grimace. Sleep deprivation was tucked under the puffy dark parts of his father's eyes. Yasmin's teething cries kept him up at night, too. Sometimes during salat al-fajr, Baba would lay her fussy body at the center of his sajadah and whisper prayers in her ears to make her pain go away.

Guilt settled between Yassir's ribs.

He looked away. Even when others extended their hands, he knotted his fingers together, acknowledging no one but himself.



2

KHALED

On the eve of Imam Hussein's murder, Khaled Al-Hakim drove back to the masjid with a smile on his face.

Tonight was the eve of Ashura. The most sacred day of the year. The day that reminded him that sacrifice for justice was more important than anything else in the world. His body buzzed with the nostalgia and purpose that Ashura brought each year . . . oh, and the beer he'd drunk over lunch.

He shouldn't have done that. But he had been so stressed about sending the letter to his superintendent, and before he knew it, he found himself drinking what Alex called liquid gold (although in Khaled's mind, murky Coors Light was far from that). It had been a while since he had done that—drinking in the day between rants in the car with his friends—mindlessly forgetting just how many sips he'd had until the last drop hit his tongue. Even Yassir, who had much bigger things to worry about, had stared at him in concern from Alex's back seat.

On Tuesday, during the sixth night of Muharram, Khaled had proudly made the call to prayer in the masjid. Now, with the alcohol still in his bloodstream, his prayers wouldn't even be valid. The last time

he drank, he'd carried the guilt for months. Now he felt it all over again, and it was too heavy to pretend.

To avoid lining up with the crowd for jumu'ah prayer, he had volunteered to buy every single carton of water from the nearby deteriorating grocery store for the special meal being served.

At least tonight was a special night. Tonight he wouldn't repent alone on his prayer rug at home. No, he'd quietly repent to Allah among the dozens of Iraqi Shias who spilled into their masjid, the air laced with sweat and worship. A night filled with sweet milk and stories about the past and stirring wishes into giant steel pots of qeema until the sun rose again.

He couldn't wait to hold his hands up to the ceiling and beat his chest so hard that after everyone shouted *Ya Hussein* in unison, a dozen tiny red dots would adorn his skin the next morning like a memorial.

Khaled wished life were always filled with excited Muslims gathering for a singular purpose. In his white, conservative city, this was rare. The only Muslim left at his school was Yassir Al-Azzawi, although Yassir didn't consider himself much of a Muslim these days.

For now, in the comfort of his Buick, Khaled lightly beat his chest with one hand, clasping the steering wheel with the other. The voice of Bassim Al-Karbalaei, his favorite Shia eulogy reader, pumped loudly from the car's raspy sound system. He didn't even care when strangers gave him bizarre looks as he drove down State Street, windows down, listening to Arabic poetry, because for the first time since he'd gotten kicked out of his American government class, he felt at peace.

Khaled swiftly parked a few lots away from the masjid—as the five spots allotted to the masjid were beyond overfilled. Only moments ago, the sky had been painted a half-bitten plum, orange and purple hues stroking the golden horizon. Now only lit cigarettes glowed under the dim streetlight where Iraqi men gathered like moths.

“Khaled, habibi!” they shouted, spotting him. “Salaam!”

“Khaled, how's your heart, habibi?” another shouted. “You doing okay?”

Khaled felt a tremor snake up his arm, but he shook it away, along with the question. He shouted his salaams back, pushing the water cartons over his skinny knees as he waddled to the masjid's entrance.

His eyes took in how many new bodies had entered the building since he'd left for the store. His bones settled at the sight. This masjid was Iraqi and Shia. Most masjids around town were the same, nearly exclusive to the small pocket of communities that lived here. The Sunni Bosnians had their own masjid—the Somalis, too.

He loved these people. He loved how loud and funny they were. How sweet and gentle they could be, too. Most Iraqis here had been forced out of Iraq during the 1991 revolution—the same time his parents had. Some had come here after. During the famine in the nineties, the US military invasion of 2003, or the invasion of ISIS a few years after. Many were refugees who had clung to one another, the way his and Yassir's family had when they'd first arrived in America.

Nearly every family dreamt and endured the same things. With his own family dwindling, he found comfort in the presence of these people—even if they were traditional in every sense of the word; marriage always came before college, and college rarely came at all. Khaled's dreams were bigger than the dreams of those who had come before him, and they admired him for it.

Outside the hellhole of Chapman High, there was a place where he was respected. Where he belonged.

"Just put them over there," Baba said, clasping Khaled's shoulder. "How many more did you bring?"

Khaled sighed. "I cleaned out the store. I promise. I won't drink water tonight, if that helps."

Baba ruffled his hair, the tobacco stains on his teeth exposed. "We need you strong during the latmiyat today. Drink water or you'll pass out. Remember when you were six and you passed out because you refused to drink anything? Muharram isn't Ramadan, habibi."

Khaled laughed at the memory. "I know that now, Baba."

“When you’re done, start taking food over to Khala Amirah for the women’s section, okay? The place is packed.”

Khaled nodded and stared at the makeshift kitchen, his jaw dropping at the sight. He blinked several times, making sure what he saw before him wasn’t a mirage. Sure enough, Yassir Al-Azzawi (who Khaled jokingly called Yassir Al-Harami) stood in the same ugly yellow hoodie he’d had on since lunch, ladling lamb tashreeb from a steel pot larger than half of his body.

If Baba hadn’t been lingering around, he’d have taken a picture to commemorate the moment.

Yassir’s father, Sayed Rahman, must be trying to get Yassir to accumulate good deeds in his latest attempt to save Yassir from sin. Perhaps if Yassir behaved like the pious boy his father wanted, the Sayed would stop threatening to send him to Iraq.

Khaled began to take the sayenas filled with mountains of rice, fluffy khubz, and Yassir’s tashreeb back and forth to the partition that separated the women and men, where Khala Amirah, one of his mother’s friends, and a few other aunties gratefully took the trays, admonishing him for getting taller just as they had done every night since Muharram, when the mourning observance started eight days ago. By the fourth trip back to the kitchen, Yassir had a hand to his nose. He had never liked lamb. Sayed Rahman had become cruel.

Look up, harami, Khaled texted him. Yassir continued his ladling.

“Khaled.” Baba’s arm was warm on his shoulder. “The trash is piling on the corner outside. Go toss it. But take someone. Stop doing everything on your own.”

Grabbing two bags of trash in each hand, Khaled scanned the kitchen again. He knew the perfect companion—but the ugly yellow hoodie had disappeared.



3

YASSIR

Before Khaled's father could spot him, Yassir dropped the ladle Baba had shoved into his hand and ran. Within a minute, he was on the other side of the parking lot, crossing close to State Street.

Yassir walked until he could no longer hear the faint noise of worship and dinner and laughing and crying. He walked until the streetlights had dimmed so much in the distance that he could barely spot his own hands in the glow of moonlight. It was not the first time he had done this, and it would not be the last. He would have kept going if it hadn't been for a set of footsteps behind him.

He always ignored strangers on his walks, as it was the safest, most practical thing to do in the middle of the night. There was also the fact that he was perpetually shy, which Ayah always teased him about. Despite the quiet stares and rare words he used when interacting with other students at Chapman High, he was somehow still more popular than her.

To be handsome and quiet, she'd laugh. What a privilege.

A shadow of spiky hair scrawled over the sidewalk, silencing his thoughts of Khaled's second-oldest sister.

“Come inside before your dad beats you up.”

He's not the father I'm afraid of right now, Yassir wanted to say.

At Yassir's silence, Khaled continued. “Yalla, Sayed Yassir! He's looking for you.”

“Stop—” Yassir caught the annoyance in his own voice. “Don't call me that.”

Being a Sayed meant people in his community expected him to be an example of piety because his bloodline was tied to the Prophet Muhammad. The same bloodline that included Imam Hussein, who was the Prophet's grandson. As the more devout of the two of them, Khaled was jealous of the title, which was why he rubbed it in Yassir's face any chance he got.

Yassir stuffed his hands into the pocket of his hoodie and continued to trudge in the opposite direction, toward the streetlights, toward Yasmin, toward home. Even though it would probably take an hour to get there, he couldn't go back to the masjid.

“Are you upset or something?” Khaled asked, marching after him. “Or are you just seriously that allergic to religion?”

“I just don't see the point,” Yassir said, going with the second option. It wasn't like he could tell Khaled the truth. “And I know you don't care, either, Khaled.”

“Me? I'm the one who reminded *you* that today was Laylat Ashura. When you wore black this morning, I was actually proud!”

Yassir spun, finding his best friend only inches away, with hulking, reeking bags of garbage hanging at his sides. “I think you're just good at faking it. Remember how you spilled beer all over me today, *Sheikh Khaled*? How are you not still drunk?”

Khaled wasn't just perfect at being religious. He was perfect at sinning, too.

“You . . . you drank, too,” Khaled retorted.

“Not *four cans*.” Yassir shook his head, staring down the street. “Listen, I can't stay. If you want to help me out, you can give me a ride home. If

you don't, you can find my murdered body in the morning." He pointed to the end of the dark alley. "That's where I'll be."

He twisted around and continued walking, hoping to scare his best friend away. The last thing Yassir needed in his life was for Khaled to get hurt. To get in trouble.

Watching him drink earlier had made Yassir feel sick. Although Alex had been the one to offer the first sip (Alex was *always* the one to offer the first sip), Yassir had encouraged them by joining in. He didn't know how to make Khaled stop doing the things he'd regret. It was only a matter of time before he'd regret being friends with Yassir, too.

The garbage bags scuffed against the concrete. Despite his words, his friend only clung closer. Typical Khaled.

"Don't you have, like . . . uncles' asses to kiss and marriage proposals to accept?" Yassir huffed. "This is why I don't call you on my walks anymore, Khaled. You're annoying as hell."

"How many times do I have to remind you that walking in the middle of the night is reckless behavior!" Khaled hissed, before dropping the bags dramatically. "When Yasmin grows up an orphan, then you'll be sorry."

Yassir pushed a middle finger up and Khaled laughed.

"Aw, Yassuri . . . you mad, habibi?"

Yassuri.

Ayah used to call him that. Ayah, whose hands lingered in his under their desks in biology class. Ayah, whose tear-streaked face was the last he saw of her as Khaled's father tore her away from him.

Hajji Abu Abdalla didn't let go of the past easily. After all, he had proudly worn the name of his son who had died in the Rafha refugee camps for as long as Yassir had known him. When he'd spotted Yassir for a brief moment at the masjid last year, rage had filled his eyes. Yassir didn't want to know what they'd look like now, despite the time that had passed.

"Just go away," Yassir grumbled in defeat. "I want to be alone."

It was Yassir's fault that the tension between their families had become worse. His fault that his best friend had started drinking.

And genius Khaled was none the wiser.

The jingle of keys rang in the air. Yassir turned.

"Listen, I do have asses to kiss and proposals to turn down, but I'm not going to just let you walk in the dark like some creep."

"Are you going to take me home?"

To Yassir's surprise, Khaled nodded. "If you're going to be a stubborn asshole, then yes. Because believe it or not, I don't want to see anything bad happen to Yasmin's dad. Even if he's an idiot ninety-nine point nine percent of the time."

Yassir narrowed his eyes. "Say wallah."

"Why do you want me to swear to God if you don't even believe in God anymore?"

"Just say wallah."

Khaled never went against his word when God was involved. "I'll tell some little kid to tell some little kid that you got a ride home from an uncle, they'll play telephone and tell your dad. Got it?"

Yassir stared at his best friend, unconvinced.

"Wallah," Khaled finally huffed, his keys reflecting under the dim streetlight.

Yassir smiled, crossed over and grabbed two garbage bags from him, and began walking back toward the masjid.

"Are you going to throw the trash in my car?" Khaled asked, pointing to the dumpster at the gas station across the street, where a blue dinosaur sign glowed in the moonlight. "I'm parked in the church lot next door. Besides, we need to make a quick pit stop first. I need like eight shots of espresso to keep me alive tonight."

"Right. You need to play golden boy for the rest of the night," Yassir scoffed as they launched the bags into the dumpster. "Just look at the collar of your dishdasha, Amu Khaled—might as well start wearing tucked-in golf shirts and a Bluetooth earpiece at all times."

A deep laugh escaped Khaled. A sound Yassir hadn't heard in so long, it nearly jarred his core. Maybe he *was* still a little buzzed from lunch today. "Literally slap me if I ever get to the Bluetooth era."

"I'll keep that promise," Yassir said as they began to walk toward the gas station. "Wallah."

When they were kids, they'd beg their fathers for a few bucks to buy as many candy bars as they could afford at this exact store. Back then, Laylat Ashura was one big sleepover. Blankets lined the floor of the masjid, sandwiches and chai passed out at intervals, the projector displaying the journey of pilgrims in Iraq making their way to the city of Karbala. The boys would sneak Ayah peanut butter cups and sour Skittles through the barrier that separated the men and women. Kawther and Fatima would scold them for wandering off so late at night, even if it was just a street away.

They would stay awake until sunlight peeked through the windows, the scent of qeema and hareesa filling the tight building. While Yassir had stopped attending years ago, Khaled still stayed up through the night every year. Whether it was out of obligation or choice, Yassir didn't know.

Khaled stepped inside the gas station first. The owners had changed over the years, so Yassir no longer recognized the interior. It seemed like the staff didn't recognize them, either, because as soon as they stepped onto the bright linoleum, two pairs of eyes were pinned to Khaled and his long black dishdasha, a distasteful look in each pair. Yassir took a sidestep away from his best friend.

"Damn, I forgot to wear my suicide bomb vest," Khaled muttered, rolling his eyes as he walked toward the coffee machine at the back of the store. The cashier, a young white man, made direct eye contact with the woman cleaning a hot dog machine.

"Shut up, Khaled," Yassir seethed, a few feet behind his best friend. "It's not funny when you say things like that."

"Why not?" Khaled asked as he reached for the largest cup on the counter. "It's what they're thinking. Haven't you noticed everyone is on

edge with us lately? Even outside of school. You know that dude from the grocery store off Carter Street who wears those big-ass American flag shirts? Less than an hour ago, I asked him where he kept the cases of water bottles and he looked at me like I walked in with an AR-15 shouting *Allahu akbar!*”

The hot dog woman stared at them. Yassir attempted to smile at her, but she didn't smile back. Anxiety prickled his skin.

“I mean, if one of us is wearing something offensive, it's you.” Khaled continued his spiel, pointing at Yassir as he grabbed two large foam cups. “Don't you know that yellow is probably the most disrespectful color you can wear today, Mr. Al-Harami?”

“Shut up.” Yassir didn't like being called religiously forbidden, even if his actions these past few years often amounted to that. “Besides, it's royal *gold*.”

“It's pukey lemon and you know it. Everyone at Chapman agrees with me—that was my most popular op-ed of all time.”

“The only thing they've ever agreed with you about,” Yassir said. “Aren't you banned from the school newspaper this quarter?”

Khaled pouted for a moment, giving his silent answer, and Yassir laughed.

“It's not funny,” Khaled said. “It's basically a gag order.”

“I wish it was,” Yassir muttered, and Khaled flipped him off. There was a buzz in Yassir's pocket, silencing his laughter. *Baba*. He rejected the call immediately. “Khaled, you done? My dad's calling and if we're caught together your dad is going to freak out and . . .”

And I'll be fucked, he thought.

Khaled shook his head. “If your dad catches you with me, he's going to think I'm putting you back on the right path. Besides, my dad isn't going to be looking for me, he trusts me—”

The words dissolved on his tongue as his gaze caught Yassir's. He didn't need to say them aloud for Yassir to know what he was going to say.

Unlike your dad.

Khaled turned and hit the side of the sputtering machine until it spewed boiling-hot coffee, splashing from his cup and burning his fingers. “Ya Allah,” he sighed loudly. “Save me from this misery.”

A dry cough echoed through the gas station. Yassir looked up. Hot Dog Woman was near the cash register now, cell phone in hand. Yassir’s stomach churned.

Khaled wasn’t paying attention and continued his prayer. “Ya Allah, grant me the patience to get Yassir’s whiny ass home and allow my body to be properly caffeinated.”

He actually cupped his hands together momentarily in dua before letting out a chuckle. Hot Dog Woman and the cashier exchanged another silent look.

“Stop talking,” Yassir whispered, tightening two lids on Khaled’s various cups. “You’re making them nervous, dude. This is why you got kicked out of government class.”

Khaled’s voice echoed loudly now. “Hmm, pretty sure that was due to racism, *Michael*.”

Yassir gaped at Khaled, his words barely pushing between his teeth. “Are you drunk?”

Khaled simply clicked his tongue as he strolled to the cashier, who grimaced at him.

The man scanned the barcodes on the cups. “That’s five-seventy-five.”

Khaled patted his dishdasha. “Shit. I forgot my wallet in my car.”

Yassir searched his pockets and pulled out a five-dollar bill. “Return something, Khaled,” he said.

The cashier shook his head. “You already filled those drinks up. You need to pay.”

“We only have five,” Yassir said nervously, fishing his empty pockets. “One of us will come back and pay the rest. Our car is just down the street.”

“You think I trust ISIS wannabes to come back and pay? Your people are always coming in, causing a ruckus,” the cashier growled.

Yassir blinked.

Khaled's face turned stony. "How about you kiss my ISIS ass?"

"*Khaled.*"

"Forget the purchase. I think you two need to leave now." Hot Dog Woman spoke up.

The cashier took Khaled's coffee and dumped it in the trash can behind him. "Get out. You can't just saunter in and terrorize my store."

"Terrorize?" Khaled echoed. Then he laughed. Hard. The same condescending laugh he used during his outbursts at school. The kind that had gotten him kicked out of government class and banned from the newspaper.

Yassir didn't want to hear what would come out of Khaled's mouth next. He clamped a hand over Khaled's shoulder and yanked him back. "Khaled, let's go. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir."

Khaled shook his head, his dark brown eyes filling with rage as he shoved Yassir away. "Why are you apologizing to them?"

"Because you're being offensive!" Yassir said.

"They just called us terrorists and you think *I'm* being offensive?" Khaled scoffed. "Ya Muhammad. Ya Ali. They took one look at us and decided they knew everything they needed to know. It's like they *want* me to promise to blow this place up just to justify their assumptions!"

"Out." Hot Dog Woman pointed to the door. "Now!"

Once she put her cell phone to her ear, Khaled finally seemed to come out of his trance. Before he stepped outside, he held up two middle fingers to the man and woman in the store. Yassir dragged Khaled by his sleeve, only letting go once they hit the end of the street.

"You need to stop being an asshole," they both shouted at the same time. "No, *you!*"

Khaled pushed a frustrated hand through his spiky hair. "You need to stop pleasing every damn white person who comes your way. Did you miss the part where they called us ISIS wannabes? Wake up, Yassir! They don't care about you."

“Me?” Yassir echoed. “This is coming from the hypocrite whose best school friend is Alex, the whitest kid I’ve ever met.”

Khaled laughed. “Oh, no, you forgot to count yourself there. *You’re* the whitest kid I know. Even your daughter is half white. You forget who you are half the time. You’re embarrassed to be around me. You’re embarrassed to be around other Iraqis or, God forbid, anyone who looks Muslim. Your family is Muslim, whether you like it or not. I’d rather be a hypocrite than pathetic.”

Yassir didn’t reply. It had been a mistake going home with Khaled. Everything he ever did with Khaled turned out to be a mistake.

They trudged back to the parking lot in silence, finding Khaled’s Buick parked just a few feet away from Yassir’s father’s taxicab.

“How am I supposed to make it through the night if I’m about to fall asleep at the wheel? Can you drive? Oh, wait . . . you lost your license.”

Yassir sighed. “Thanks for shoving that in my face.”

“I’m bringing it up because I just remembered.” Khaled shook his head. “Honestly, if I hadn’t sworn on behalf of God to take you home, I’d drag your ass right back to your dad right now. Also don’t give me that look, I’m good to drive. I’m not drunk.”

The Buick beeped open. Yassir hesitated before he slipped into the passenger seat. He caught a glimpse of little kids shoving each other across the road in the cramped masjid parking lot. He and Khaled used to do that when they were little, and Hajji Abu Abdalla would grab them by the collars of their shirts and swing them until they were dizzy and giggling into the crook of his arms, as he commanded them to go back inside and listen to the sheikh’s lecture. Always with kindness. Patience. Yassir couldn’t remember what it was like to be treated with those virtues anymore.

“Listen, Yassir, what I said before . . .” Khaled’s voice softened now. An unspoken apology in his tone. “I take back what I said about Yasmin. I don’t care what she is, she’s still my goddaughter.”

Yassir rolled his eyes. “For the *billionth* time, she doesn’t have a godfather.”

“I’m still her uncle, then, even if our siblings never married.” A pang of sadness entered Yassir’s chest for what could’ve been. “I’ll always be Amu Khaled.”

Khaled yawned. Yassir could see his own childhood reflected in Khaled’s face. Every izzema dinner and s’more at the campfire. Every superhero movie and water gun fight. Everything good, everything whole, before Kawther tore their families apart. Before Ayah got married and left, too.

Khaled sighed deeply. “I miss her.”

Me too, Yassir thought.

He hadn’t seen his daughter since he’d kissed her sleeping cheeks goodbye that morning. The thought of her cries made his stomach clench. Sometimes it was hard to see all his mistakes in her eyes and rock her to sleep.

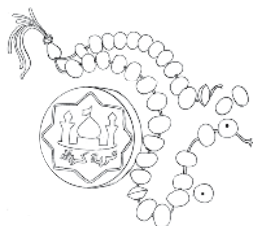
Yassir tapped the screen of his phone, finding notifications of three missed calls from Baba covering Yasmin’s giggling face in the background.

He texted his father, despite knowing that Baba struggled to read text messages. I’m tired so I got a ride home. Sorry, Baba.

He hoped the word *sorry* would work in his favor for once.

Bassim Al-Karbalaei’s voice trickled out of the speakers in the Buick. Khaled was right, Yassir was a coward.

But just before their escape, red and blue police lights illuminated their faces.



4

KHALED

The last time Khaled Al-Hakim had spoken to a cop was when he was beaten at the school playground ten years ago. Kawther had called the police and Khaled had stared at the officer then, just as he did now, his mouth frozen open.

The officer tapped on the window.

“Please step out of the car, sir.”

This was wrong. Khaled Al-Hakim was not the type of kid to get pulled over.

“*Out of the car, sir.*”

“Khaled,” Yassir urged, pushing his arm. “Do as she says. *Hurry.*”

“You with the curly hair,” the officer said, pointing at his best friend. “You too, okay?”

Yassir slammed the passenger door and Khaled’s spine jolted. His body followed Yassir’s on autopilot. Of course Yassir knew what to do.

Khaled watched as his best friend dropped his arms, no longer hiding his fists in his hoodie. Yassir didn’t look the officer directly in the eye, but he didn’t look at his feet, either.

“You drunk, kid?” the officer asked Khaled.

“N-no,” Khaled stuttered. “I’m not.”

“You look paranoid.”

“Should I be?” Khaled asked.

“*Ihmar*,” Yassir muttered beneath his breath in Arabic. “Iskit.”

Shut up, dumbass.

Right. He should do that.

The officer’s gray ponytail shone under the dim streetlight. “Got a smart-ass here? You know what’s easier than asking questions? A Breathalyzer test.”

Shit, he could hear an audience of uncles and little kids approaching them.

“Don’t talk,” Yassir whispered to him as the officer grabbed the test from her car, her eyes flitting between them and the inside of the car every few seconds. “You know they can use what you say in court.”

“I’m legit going to piss my pants,” Khaled said. “I swear to God. I’m going to pee right here.”

“Shut. Up.”

The officer came back. “I got a disturbance call from that gas station back at Twentieth and Main. I was told two boys who seemed a little intoxicated came by and started threatening the workers. They said they drove a Buick. One in a black dress. The other in a bright yellow hoodie. That sound familiar?”

“It’s not a dre—”

Yassir nudged him.

For once, he should listen to Yassir Al-Azzawi, the kid who had a kid and a DUI and a revoked license.

Yeah. Yassir the Wise. The great mistake.

“I’m sorry, Officer.” Khaled started over and Yassir’s eyes widened. Khaled’s years as a debate champion and spending local Arbaeen walks passing out flyers about Imam Hussein to random bystanders had prepared him for this moment. “There’s a big misunderstanding. We’re not intoxicated, okay? We’re Muslim. We’re not even religiously allowed

to drink. And the building behind us? That's our mosque. It's a holy night. We stay up and make prayers on behalf of Imam Hussein and his family. Do you know who he is? He sacrificed his life—"

"Put your hands down where I can see them!"

The officer did not care to learn about Imam Hussein or the fact that Khaled talked with his hands a lot.

Yassir chewed his lips nervously.

Khaled Al-Hakim wouldn't go down without a fight. He held still. "The gas station workers were being racist. I swear. The clerk called us ISIS wannabes."

"They said you threatened to blow up the station."

"That was an exaggeration, ma'am."

A faint scent of cigarettes lingered in the air. The uncles were approaching with a million Arabic questions.

Khaled, habibi, what's going on?

Why is there a cop?

Are you in trouble?

Khaled attempted to turn and assuage them, but the cop barked at him.

"Turn around so I can see you!"

Khaled gulped and turned. Yassir's mouth trembled.

The cop stepped closer to Khaled as more uncles approached. Little kids, too. Fear suddenly gripped Khaled. Videos of cops body-slaming and gunning down innocent people on the street flashed in his mind.

"Khaled, what's happening?" Hajji Majid asked as he approached. "Why is there a police officer here?"

Hajji Abbas inserted himself between Khaled and the officer. "Why are you questioning these boys?"

"I need you all to step back!" the officer shouted, a hand to her holster. Sweat trickled down Khaled's spine. The Hajjis simply stared at her until she gave another warning, and they took a step back.

The woman grimaced. "Listen, boys. I can believe people say nasty things. But from the looks of how you're acting, I'm going to administer

a Breathalyzer test. Tell your friends to take at least ten steps back. You can even tell them in your language, okay? Let's be reasonable."

Khaled silently stared at the uncles, who watched in awe. Khaled had never been in trouble. At least, not like this.

The officer stuck the Breathalyzer tube in his mouth. "Blow."

Khaled stared at her, eyes pleading. She had no idea just how this simple thing was going to completely ruin him.

"Fuck," Yassir muttered.

"You're next, Curly," she said. Her gloves pulled away and she announced the results. "Blood alcohol level is zero point oh three eight. You might want to stop lying, kid."

Khaled closed his eyes.

"You a minor? Got your ID?"

"It's in the car."

"Tell me where it is, I'll grab it."

Khaled's voice quivered. "Cup holder."

"Stay where you are. Hands stay in the air. Understand? If you move, I *will* Tase you."

Yassir swore beneath his breath again. Khaled closed his eyes and put his hands up. *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim. Ya Allah, please wake me from this shitty dream.* But when he opened his eyes again, the crowd had doubled in size.

He spotted Baba's confused face in the parking lot. Then his father was running over.

"Khaled? What's happening?"

"Sir, I need you to take ten steps back!" the officer instructed as she began to test Yassir's blood alcohol level.

"This is my son," Baba said, his voice cracking. Khaled's heart seized.

"Oh?" the woman said as she read Yassir's test. "Zero point zero one. How long has it been since you both consumed alcohol?"

"Alcohol?" Baba echoed, his eyes wide. "Khaled, what is she saying?"

The woman shook her head as she wrote on her notepad. “There was a disturbance at the gas station next door. These two were accused of harassing the workers; they both just failed a Breathalyzer test. Your son’s blood alcohol content is zero point oh three eight. Not drunk. But he might have been at one point.”

“Drunk?” Baba murmured in disbelief. His eyes bored into Khaled for only a moment before he turned to Yassir and asked, “What have you done?”



5

YASSIR

The minute the officer drove away, the yelling began. “I asked you to take out the trash, not act like garbage yourself!” Hajji Abu Abdalla spat at Khaled, his eyes still glued to Yassir.

Khaled, who always had a million words in his mouth, stood in silence.

Khaled could argue with any teacher, any rich kid whose parents had power, he even backtalked the cop, but if there was one person Khaled couldn’t stand up to, it was his father. He respected him too much.

Just after the officer finished writing the citations, Baba’s eyes found Yassir through the crowd. Hajji Majid, Yassir’s old boss, pestered the officer with endless questions until she finally got into her car and drove away. They would learn how much their fines would be in court.

Court.

In a few months, Yassir was supposed go to court to get his license back, and now he was facing another underage drinking fine. Worse, Baba’s disappointed eyes were getting closer and closer. Running away

from his father would be pathetic, right? Having the eyes of every Iraqi uncle watching his nightmare unfold, shedding light on his sins, on his friendship with Khaled, on this latest fuckup, felt pathetic enough. His heart was still racing. Each time the officer had touched her holster, all he could think about was Yasmin. How this morning, when he'd barely given her a glance and a peck on the cheek before school, could've been the last time he ever saw her.

Baba's cologne flooded his senses now. Yassir extended his arm in hopes his father would just grab him by the sleeve and drag him to the cab and take him home and scold him in private. Instead, Baba stopped a few inches away from him.

"Going around with kids who will impregnate the first white girl they meet?" The Hajji's voice had grown quiet as Baba approached, but his words cut through the air. "Is that the future you want, Khaled? This is the future you are asking for!"

When Yassir was a toddler, he used to call Hajji Abu Abdalla *Baba*, because he acted as his second father. The Hajji's eyes would illuminate each time Yassir called him that, and he would ruffle Yassir's hair with pride. He used to keep a photo of Yassir in his wallet. First grade, gap between his teeth, cheeks still chubby.

Now the man stared at him in pure disgust. It was what Yassir had been trying to avoid, even if he deserved it.

"B-Baba." Khaled stuttered his first word since the cop had left. His eyes momentarily caught Yassir's. "I was just taking Yassir home."

Yassir grimaced. Khaled never stayed silent when he should. Not in school. Not in the gas station. Not now.

Khaled saying his name only disgusted the Hajji more as he continued with his *The Al-Azzawis Are Not Your Friends Anymore* speech. It was a speech Yassir had heard multiple times since the age of ten. The kind that caused his parents to squirm in silence—as if their families had not once been intertwined as one. His parents always just stood

and took the insults, just as Baba did now. Sometimes Yassir wondered if it was in their blood, to take the insults publicly, while the real battle happened quietly at home.

“You don’t let your son near mine,” Hajji Abu Abdalla said, turning to Baba, clutching a fistful of Khaled’s dishdasha sleeve. He sounded desperate. “How many times do I have to beg your family to leave mine alone?”

Yassir’s eyes caught with Khaled’s for a moment—glossy, raging with sadness. Khaled looked away. *Please don’t say more*, Yassir begged Hajji Abu Abdalla silently. *Don’t say Ayah’s name. Don’t say what I did. Don’t. Don’t. Don’t.*

But after a few silent moments, uncles surrounded Hajji Abu Abdalla, telling him to go back inside and to praise Allah to calm himself down. He eventually nodded, dragging Khaled away.

“Yassir.”

A hopeless stare that often filled Baba’s meek eyes locked with Yassir’s. The disappointment overflowed, sobering in an instant whatever buzz Yassir might have had left in his system. When Yassir had brought Yasmin home for the very first time, Baba had looked at him with the same expression.

What have you done?

Hajji Abu Abdalla had asked him the same thing not so long ago.

Under the amber streetlights, Baba looked twice his age. He stepped closer and closer until he placed a hand on Yassir’s shoulder. His breath was slow and jagged enough to pierce Yassir’s anxiety.

“Where were you?” Baba’s breath tingled on Yassir’s cheeks as Baba tried to piece together the past twenty minutes. “I told you to stay.”

The stiff collar of Baba’s dishdasha scratched Yassir’s neck.

He had never been this close to his father.

Baba smelled like spicy Iraqi cologne and the green mouthwash they kept in the bathroom. Their foreheads touched. The smell felt comforting, like home.

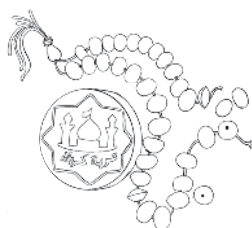
Home.

How had it only been three hours since school let out and he missed home?

Home was Yasmin.

Home was regret.

Home was Baba's rough hand connecting to his cheek for the very first time, providing the cleanest, sharpest slap Yassir had ever heard.



6

KHALED

FORTY-FIVE DAYS BEFORE

On Monday morning, Khaled stayed in sujud until his feet fell asleep. Until he was sure the words from the turbah rock engraved his forehead, and his prayers for forgiveness were automatic on his tongue.

“Khaled.”

Every morning, every evening, and every moment in between after the events of Friday night, he had fallen to his knees and asked God to forgive his sins. While the blue and red police lights had sobered him up that night, it was Baba’s eyes—glistening with anger, disappointment, and something wild and unknown in between—that would not stop haunting him.

How many times? Baba had asked later that night, after sending Khaled home.

I don’t know, Khaled had admitted, foolishly. But the truth was that he’d lost count months ago.

Do you know your prayers might not be valid for forty days? Baba had reminded him. *Yet how many times have you come and prayed by my side as if you were clear of sin?*

While beliefs were split on forgiveness for drinking alcohol—whether it was forty days or immediate mercy from Allah—one thing was clear: Khaled had to stop.

He wanted to return to the way he used to feel before. Before everything in his life had become unrecognizable.

Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear.

Yet there were days when Khaled could not bear it. He'd just never wanted to admit it to anyone besides himself. Now every Iraqi within a fifty-mile radius knew.

"Khaled."

A hand shook his arm, and he forced himself up before Kawther could touch him again. After nearly eight years of silence, his oldest sister stared down at him, hands nervously tucking into the pockets of her black pin-striped pantsuit, a small leather briefcase at her side, the strap thrown over her baby-blue hijab. Sometimes he'd wondered if she had lied about law school, using it as an excuse to run away from their family. For all he knew, she could have been a dropout, living in a van in the desert. But right now, she kind of looked like a lawyer. Now she said she was back for good, attempting to fit her life back into theirs as if they had not learned to live without her.

"Baba asked me to take you to school. He had to take the sheikh back to the airport before heading to the shop, and Mama . . ."

She didn't have to say it.

Mama was more interested in staring at the walls in her bedroom than driving Khaled to school. Since Kawther had returned, Mama rarely left her room anymore. After Friday night, Mama had avoided both of them.

Khaled nodded, silencing the dozens of questions that spawned each time Kawther looked at him. He tightly wound his prayer rug, grabbed his backpack, and followed her outside, sliding into the Honda Accord that shivered each time she started the engine.

After eight years, she still had it.

She'd given up everything—all of them—but not this stupid old car. The car she used to drive him and Ayah to dentist appointments and doctor visits. The car where they'd sip on milkshakes when the summers were harsh and the house was boring. Both jealous of and annoyed by the decaying leather seats, Khaled leaned his head against the window, his brain begging for sleep as she drove.

"I took my ACT here," Kawther said as they neared Chapman High. "Do they still have that fancy little fountain in the quad? I remember Baba was so fascinated when he saw the building. He must have really wanted you to come here."

Baba didn't care where he went to school. It was Khaled who had begged for him and Ayah to come to this insufferable institution. If not for his commitment to the debate team, he would have switched to a public school long ago, but a Chapman diploma carried a lot more weight than any regular high school diploma. Besides, he couldn't just abandon Yassir. If it weren't for Chapman, he might never get to see his best friend again. Although after Friday night, he wasn't sure if Yassir wanted to see him again.

Khaled stared out the window. He had approximately six minutes left of this car ride.

Kawther cleared her throat awkwardly at his silence. He'd only seen her once in the past eight years, and that was over a year ago. After that painful visit, she'd left them in the dust again. He wondered what it would take to scare her off now.

"Oh, before I forget, here's this back," she said, sifting through her briefcase at a stoplight. She retrieved the cell phone that Baba had confiscated from him on Friday. Khaled knew that his father had asked her to snoop for him, since he didn't understand all the English messages and apps on the phone. "Baba said you can have it back since he needs you to take care of the orders at the shop. I didn't pry, I swear. I just told him I saw everything so he would let me give it back. I'd rather you be honest with me than invade your privacy if you're into other trouble."

Khaled swallowed. He wondered if she'd seen his endless texts with Yassir. The voice notes that had gone unanswered. The complaints he'd made about her return. With all that she had done to their families, he decided he wouldn't feel embarrassed or bad if she did pry. She should know how much he hated her.

"Also, about the arraignment." Kawther's voice thickened. "I talked to Baba, and we thought it was best that I represent you instead of a public attorney. I'll pick you up from school on Wednesday and we'll go straight to the courthouse. I'll do the talking, okay?"

He continued to say nothing as she began to give him the rundown. From the uncertainty in her voice, it seemed like he would be her first real client in a courtroom.

Great.

Khaled stared at the car's digital clock. *Four more minutes.*

"I'm sure you feel scared," she said. "But you need to be honest with me, Khaled. Was that your first time drinking? Did Yassir give you the alcohol?"

If she hadn't run away, he wouldn't have had to hide his friendship with his oldest friend from his parents in the first place.

"If he did, you really need to rethink your relationship with him. His family . . ." Kawther stopped.

His family *what?*

Was also torn apart by her leaving. Ali had been so heartbroken, he'd left for Iraq, got married there, and moved on, only returning to America for short visits every few years.

His family also hates you.

At the next red light near the strip of small shops, Khaled could see the red brick towers of Chapman High peeking over the tall oak trees.

Two more minutes.

He unclicked his seat belt.

"Khaled—" she said, attempting to grab his arm, but he already had one foot out of the car and was slamming the door behind him before

she could object, as the stoplight turned green. He trudged toward the school, the sky pelting rain as his sister's car squealed away. He watched as flocks of students scuttled over pristine stone steps into the building as a harsh gust of wind chilled his bones.

The minute he crossed the threshold into the warm building, he found Principal Delpy standing in the hallway, gesturing for him to step into her office.



7

YASSIR

A small gray bruise had appeared just below Yassir's cheekbone. It was firm and sore, and Yasmin loved to poke at it, just as she loved to pick at the three thick moles dotted across his neck.

While he attempted to brush his hair before leaving for school, she curled her hand around the frayed hem of his jeans. He gave up, throwing his hood over his head, and picked her up before pushing the soft chestnut ringlets out of her face and kissing her temple. She began to cry as he handed her to Mama, who sat half asleep on the couch. He followed Baba out the door, holding back tears of his own.

In the car, Baba slid on his thick black sunglasses, avoiding eye contact. Yassir didn't want an apology, and it wasn't like his father would offer him one, anyway. As on most rides with his father, they did not speak aside from Baba whispering *astaghfirullah* over and over until it blended with the verses of Quranic Arabic murmuring from the speakers.

His father could thank or praise God, as he did often at home, between sips of chai as the Arabic satellite news blasted from the television, but it seemed that whenever Yassir was in his vicinity lately, Baba always asked God for forgiveness.

Before Yasmin, before Yassir's first car and his first DUI, Baba had spent the ride to school telling funny stories about customers he'd met on his fares. He would ask Yassir about his classes or say how proud he was of Yassir's good grades in math. He even used to ask Yassir about his dreams, about what he wanted to be. Yassir never had an answer.

Baba wanted him to become a doctor or engineer, but he'd always end the conversation with *It's your choice, habibi. Do what makes you happy.*

Now Yassir didn't know what it felt like to be happy for longer than a few seconds after Yasmin's cute smiles or Khaled's ridiculous jokes. Everything that brought him any sense of joy these days inevitably reminded him of his failures. Yassir didn't know if he could achieve a happiness that would not disappoint Baba in the end.

Yassir closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, the Crown Victoria was pulling toward the same cold curb Yassir would be expected to return to at the end of the school day.

"Mikey!" Alex yelled from the parking lot, hands cupping his mouth. No one called him Mikey except for Alex. It was weird to have a nickname for his fake name. It only confused his father more. His father never asked why he went by Michael, and he commented little about it.

Yassir slammed the passenger door, waiting to hear the cab crunch over the gravel before acknowledging his friend.

"Oh my God, Mikey," Alex gasped as he approached. "Did Khaled finally beat you up?"

Khaled couldn't even beat a boxing bag properly. He'd had to switch gym courses junior year because he sprained his hand on the first day of class. As many times as Yassir and Khaled had verbally fought, they'd never beaten each other up. However, when the police officer had handed them fines like gift certificates last Friday, Yassir had wanted to clock his best friend in the face *at least* once. Maybe several times.

Yassir shook his head at Alex as they walked to first period, avoiding the hallway that connected to Principal Delpy's office. If she saw him,

she'd pull him into another unsolicited lecture about his failing grades. As one of the five anonymous scholarship recipients in a school that promised Ivy League hopefuls, he wasn't just tarnishing his own reputation but also Delpy's attempt to make the school more inclusive of kids with lower socioeconomic status. A status that, unfortunately, belonged to Yassir as well.

After Chapman's low rating for its diversity practices in the latest edition of *Private School Quarterly*, Delpy was grasping at straws. It didn't help that Khaled had put the school on edge with his fight with their American government teacher last week. But Khaled always kept the school on edge, even when he put his feet up in class and quietly observed.

And Yassir was working on the failing grades. As much as a kid with fifty-eight missing assignments and a baby keeping him up at all hours could. But by the time he got up every morning, he had accumulated about twenty minutes of rest total, which, unfortunately, made the smooth, shiny desks of Chapman High incredibly enticing for napping.

Yassir slid next to the seat Khaled would be sitting in if he could learn to shut his mouth for once. Although Yassir was failing American government, too, there was something specifically about Wells's monotonous voice that made him unable to resist his exhaustion. It was also easier to fall asleep without Khaled arguing with Wells or Miles every few minutes. Maybe they would get through an entire lesson today. A solid fifty-five-minute nap.

"We're circling back to global extremism," Wells said as he queued up a slide deck with those exact words bolded in black above a map of the Middle East and Africa. Alex's hand shot up.

"Mr. McClusky, the bell literally rang less than five minutes ago." Wells raised his eyebrows, annoyed. "There will be no hall pass privileges without a valid excuse."

Tommy Smith, the class pothead who occasionally supplied Yassir with joints for free (Tommy had a charitable heart), was to blame for

that one. He left class so often that teachers had lobbied to be given the choice when to restrict hall pass privileges. Sometimes at Chapman High, students were treated as future leaders. Other times, like they were still in the first grade.

Alex stuttered, "Um, no . . . I just thought, well . . . I just thought we weren't going to talk about terrorism in class anymore?" His eyes darted back to Yassir. "Because of like . . . that incident last week."

If Khaled getting kicked out of a class was considered an incident, well, Chapman High had gone approximately five days without an incident. For Khaled, that was a new record. But this time, Yassir wondered if both of them had gone too far. Khaled had angered nearly every teacher in this pompous private school, but Yassir had never seen a teacher have a full meltdown the way Wells had, face red and spit flying out of his mouth as he slammed his hands on his desk. If it hadn't been for the large desk acting as a barrier between them, Yassir wondered if Wells would've assaulted Khaled with his fists instead of his words.

Now Mr. Wells clicked his tongue at Alex. "The student who was triggered by last week's assignment has been excused from today's class. It's a sensitive topic for them."

"We all know it's Khaled, Mr. Wells," Brooks Stewart said, and Miles laughed.

Everyone knew what had happened because Khaled had told Alex and Alex had told everyone he knew. Despite choosing Yassir and Khaled as his best friends, Alex was pretty well-liked.

Mr. Wells rolled his eyes, neither confirming nor denying the obvious truth, as he played a documentary about the rise of Al-Qaeda, narrated by a retired CIA agent with six Purple Hearts or something. Yassir felt the class's eyes creep over him.

Freshman year, after he and Khaled had reconnected at Chapman, Khaled had told everyone that they were cousins. Now anytime someone bad-mouthed Khaled, they also shot inquisitive stares at Yassir. Like he

was Khaled's public relations representative. Or worse, Islam's public relations representative.

Wells scanned the classroom. "Take notes, everyone. There will be a quiz at the end of class. Michael, wake up. Hoodie off."

Yassir sat up and sighed. He clicked his pen and listened to the documentary.

"... the Quran is often a tool used to incite violence ..."

The video showed a group of men praying before the image transitioned to faceless men in dishdashas and agals shooting at a building.

Yassir's chest burned. He was sick of videos like this always playing at school. He thought about the man at the gas station calling them ISIS wannabes. Khaled's outburst. The cop touching him.

Alex poked Yassir with the end of his pencil, pulling him back into the moment. "Did you know Khaled was excused from class? What if they're getting him kicked out? Man, I knew he shouldn't have written that letter to the superintendent last week."

Yassir felt the bruise on his cheek sting; there were a lot of things Khaled should regret now. He couldn't decide if it was more foolish for his American government teacher to assign a presentation about a terrorist organization of the student's choice, or for Khaled to choose the US military as his subject.

Khaled had only gotten as far as relaying the details of the Blackwater massacre before Wells walked to the front of the classroom and yanked the flash drive out of the computer.

"Clearly you didn't follow instructions. Take a seat."

"But I didn't even get to the part about soldiers raping girls younger than your daughter, Mr. Wells," Khaled had said, putting on a pout. It was clearly the wrong choice of words, because Mr. Wells's face became stone. "I have like three more massacres I wanted to talk about. You think that poor little boy's brain sliding out of his head thanks to Blackwater contractors is the worst it gets?"

"Sit. Down," Wells repeated.

Khaled smirked all the way back to his desk. The next presentation, which was about the Charlie Hebdo massacre, appeared on the screen. Khaled blew out an audible breath and tried to exchange a look with Yassir, but Yassir put his head down on his desk.

When the class dispersed, stares and whispers aimed at Khaled continued as they shuffled out. Then Wells's meltdown began.

"You think it's funny to offend half the class?"

"Who?" Khaled had laughed, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Name me someone who isn't terminally racist, and I'll believe they were actually offended."

As Wells had continued raging, he'd noticed Yassir still lingering at the door. Before Khaled could turn and see him, Yassir had walked away.

Now, light suddenly spilled from the corner of the classroom, interrupting Yassir's dozing. An office aide poked their head into the room as the documentary played. Sophomore year, Ayah was an office aide during first period. Sometimes she'd interrupt Yassir and Khaled's calculus class, and she'd smile at Yassir when Khaled wasn't looking before handing her note to the teacher, her gaze soft, her lips pink, the golden honey in her eyes filled with a secret just between her and Yassir.

"Now?" Wells sighed loudly at the aide, reading the piece of paper before his eyes caught Yassir's.

Yassir braced himself.

Delpy better *not* be summoning him. Whether it was for his failing grades or Khaled pulling him deeper into shit, he didn't want anything to do with it.

But Wells looked away and paused the documentary for a moment. "Okay, class, I have to step out—Vice Principal Beckett will step in soon. Turn the quiz in to him."

What if Khaled's complaint to get Wells fired for Islamophobia had actually worked?

Alex's hand shot up instantly and Mr. Wells looked like he was going to have an aneurysm.

“No questions—”

“I really need to pee,” Alex whined, shaking his legs for drama. “I drank like an entire iced macchiato before class and it’s hitting me now.”

Giggles swept through the classroom. This was extremely typical of Alex.

Mr. Wells sighed, giving in. “C’mon, I’ll make sure you actually head in the right direction.”

Alex nodded vigorously and stood up, smirking at Yassir. He clearly wanted to snoop on his way to the bathroom.

The minute they both stepped out, soft chatter filled the room as the documentary continued to play.

“Look, it’s Khaled’s dad,” Miles muttered, and Brooks laughed. The screen filled with an older dark-skinned man in the center, eyes fixed on the camera, loading an AK-47. He looked nothing like Hajji Abu Abdalla. He didn’t even share the same language or ethnicity. But it didn’t matter.

The kids at Chapman, the gas station clerk, and everyone else who was intimidated by the presence of anyone who even appeared to be Muslim didn’t care to think of them as anything but dangerous.

Despite their parents not having spoken in eight years, Khaled would never let anyone say this about Yassir’s father. But as in all situations that made him nervous, Yassir found that silence lived more comfortably in his mouth.

He said nothing. Just like the day he’d brought Yasmin home, dodging questions from his mother and older sister about the wailing one-month-old in his arms and the old white couple who’d come to waive their rights over her. Just like the day Hajji Abu Abdalla had confronted him, or the day Ayah had left for good.

Uneasiness prickled between his ribs.

Despite being the son of a revolutionary who fought against Saddam Hussein’s brutal dictatorship, Yassir Al-Azzawi rarely pushed back. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Baba had once stood up against

injustice. The only injustice Baba had ever stood up to since then was Yassir's bare cheek in the moonlight.

Words began to form on Yassir's tongue, but before he could find the strength to speak them, Vice Principal Beckett was there, silencing the giggles that echoed throughout the classroom.



8

KHALED

“Sorry for being late, I had to escort Mr. McClusky to the bathroom,” Mr. Wells said as he crossed over to shake hands with his bosses before he took a seat on the blue chair adjacent to Khaled’s. “He’s a wanderer.”

Khaled tried not to turn his head to the glass wall facing the hallway. Alex’s snoopy ass must be lurking around, waiting to share gossip about Khaled’s mission to get Wells fired.

“Khaled,” Mr. Wells greeted him, his ears redder than the paint splotches of fake blood Baba had made Khaled dribble on the masjid Muharram drapes. Khaled ignored the man whose last words to him last week had been *I’d rather eat dog shit than teach you* and *If you come back in here, you’re getting an automatic failing grade*.

“Are we sure we don’t want parents here?” Mr. Marks, the stuffy superintendent, said, glancing at his watch. Principal Delpy and Khaled both shook their heads immediately.

“We didn’t have time to schedule the Arabic interpreter,” Principal Delpy said, arms folded in the corner of the room. “Last time we had a bit of trouble understanding everything Mr. Al-Hakim said.”

Two years ago, when Khaled complained about Ayah's hijab nearly getting pulled off in gym class, Baba came into the office in a fury, startling the principal as he relayed to her in extreme detail the poor conditions and torture he had endured in the Rafha refugee prison camp. How their family had nearly starved to death, that the Saudi soldiers used electric wires to damage his spine after he protested over the inadequate food rations for his pregnant wife. And that he hadn't lost his firstborn—Abdalla—whose name he still wore like a badge of honor, only for his kids to suffer at a private school that cost more than the down payment of their house. Delpy, who was made visibly uncomfortable by it all, simply tightened a smile, promising she'd take their complaints and safety seriously.

"I didn't mean to pull you out of first period, Ryan, but I felt that it was urgent that we get this taken care of now, as this letter has reached the board of trustees, too," Mr. Marks said with great annoyance. "I wanted to get some procedures straight, Mr. Al-Hakim. First, I can't just fire a teacher because someone asks for it. A thorough investigation must be conducted, and mediation is always the first approach. While Mr. Wells will express his own feelings, I think it's important to note that your teacher was purely reacting to an extremely insensitive presentation that distressed your fellow students. I take student safety very seriously. So"—his dark brown eyes met Khaled's—"welcome to mediation."

Mediation?

His teacher insulted him and threatened to fail him, and they were going to mediate?

"Mr. Al-Hakim, let's start with you." Mr. Marks shuffled the paperwork in his hands, where Khaled's rage letter sat at the top of the stack. "I've reviewed the rubric and I have to say, I'm inclined to believe Mr. Wells was within his rights to threaten to fail you for the assignment. It seems that you misinterpreted instructions."

"What exactly did I misinterpret?" Khaled asked, trying to use his level debate voice. Calm but pointed. "He asked me to present about terrorism based on the definition he taught us, so I did."

“Calling your classmates’ family members who served in the army, some who were killed by terrorists themselves, terrorists, is extremely offensive, Khaled,” Mr. Wells piped up. “I told you to present about an *officially recognized* terrorist organization, and the United States Army, despite your interpretation, doesn’t count.”

Mr. Marks and Delpy stared at Khaled to confirm that this was what he had actually done.

“No.” Khaled shook his head. “It wasn’t just the army; it was the entire US military.”

Silence.

“Is this funny to you, Mr. Al-Hakim?” Mr. Marks asked.

Yassir always complained that Khaled’s pompousness was visible in his eyes. “No.”

“Mr. Wells?” Mr. Marks said. “What do you think?”

Khaled’s government teacher blew out a breath. “I think we’ve had so many complaints over the semester, I’ve lost count, but on the day you made that presentation, I had at least nine parents call that evening, asking why I’m teaching their kids to hate this country. I think Khaled is a bright student, I do, but he doesn’t care for education, only provocation of his classmates. I have never felt this stressed teaching a class in my ten years at Chapman High . . . Which is why I agree with Khaled’s letter—I’d rather not return to the classroom if it means he will be there.”

Dr. Delpy’s jaw dropped. “Ryan—”

Khaled’s head whipped around in shock.

Mr. Wells shook his head. “He’s made classmates cry, he’s angered parents, and these are things that happened before he even entered my classroom. Khaled, you clearly were accepted into this prestigious institution for a reason, but I am asking that we stay separated. Otherwise, I will hand in my badge and keys today. I’m sorry that it’s come to this, but I am not in the business of allowing students to hijack my classroom.”

Hijack.

Khaled's eyes turned to his teacher. The man who'd screamed at him just days ago now frowned as if he were the victim. He was painting Khaled as more than an occasional class disrupter—as a legitimate offender, a danger to his classmates. Between the gas station employees and Mr. Wells, Khaled wondered if there was anywhere he'd be allowed to tell the truth.

Marks raised a bushy gray eyebrow at Delpy. "How many complaints has Mr. Al-Hakim had?"

"Six," Delpy said, arms folded. "Just this year."

Khaled bit his lip. He was only aware of three, and two were from Miles, who he disregarded since Miles had choked him on the playground in second grade, blaming Khaled for his brother dying in Iraq. Miles hadn't really stopped taking it out on him since then.

"How many last year?" Marks asked.

"Four," Delpy answered. "Two in sophomore year. Zero in freshman."

Khaled swallowed. She had this memorized. Each year his tolerance for the offensive comments he received at school and for the way the school handled his complaints was further depleted. There were plenty of instances of discrimination he hadn't reported. But after Ayah had dropped out last year, he no longer cared to spare anyone's feelings. It wasn't like anyone had spared hers.

"A steady increase?" Marks noted. "It is very concerning to hear that you have so many complaints regarding your behavior."

"But this meeting isn't about those other complaints," Khaled insisted, frustration rising in his throat. "This is about my teacher screaming at me and cursing me out over a class assignment. Why am I the only person in trouble here?"

"This isn't about getting *you* in trouble." Marks frowned. "Your history of class disruption must be taken into account. Clearly, we can't put you both in the same classroom while we make our final decision regarding disciplinary action for both you *and* Mr. Wells. This decision will be made internally. Mr. Wells, your students rely heavily on you,

especially as state exams are approaching. Mr. Al-Hakim—" Marks's eyes narrowed at Khaled. "It's too late in the year to switch your schedule. You will replace your first period in the classroom with independent study in the library with Mrs. Marsh."

So Khaled was the one being kicked out of class? Great.

Perhaps this was a trial from Allah. For all his stupid indiscretions.

Khaled straightened, hoping a tremor of anxiety was not visible on his folded hands. "And . . . how long will this decision take?"

Delpy spoke up, addressing both of them now. "I'll have to look into the other open complaints against you and speak to the students in Mr. Wells's class before making my decision. A thorough investigation will take up to a week or two. I'll review hallway footage, see if there were any eyewitnesses who can confirm either of your statements. Once the investigation concludes, you will each have one week to appeal the decision if you don't agree. Processing your appeal will take longer."

"In the meantime, Mr. Al-Hakim, you'll be on academic probation," Mr. Marks added, "meaning you won't be able to attend any extracurricular activities until the investigation is complete and you've accepted whatever penalty Principal Delpy deems appropriate."

Khaled couldn't keep his voice from cracking. "Even . . . debate?"

Delpy sighed. "Even debate."

In three weeks, he was supposed to be winning the debate championship for Chapman High and securing a full-ride scholarship to the political science program of his choice. If this investigation ran long, or if he appealed the decision, his probation period would prevent that, and everything he had worked toward for the past four years would be meaningless.

Don't you get tired of fighting it all? Ayah had whispered to him a few weeks before she dropped out.

Delpy's pink nails pushed against her blazer. "Again, we would hate to see this issue preventing Mr. Wells from doing his job, or Khaled from earning his education here at Chapman. I expect both of you to

be on your best behavior these next few weeks and to remember the core values of our school. If either of you has any additional information for me to consider or if you change your mind about your desired outcomes for this situation, please let me know.”

It's useless to try. Yassir knows it. I know it. When will you finally get it? What are you even fighting for?

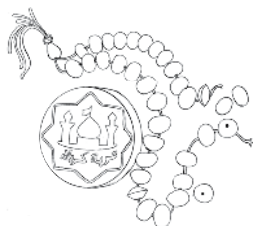
Even though his sister no longer attended Chapman, he was fighting for her. Fighting against all the bullshit that had caused her to leave this school, and to leave him, too.

Mr. Wells's eyes briefly met Khaled's, and it was clear that he would not change his mind. He said his goodbyes and left.

“Go ahead and finish first period in the library,” Delpy told Khaled. “I'll let Mrs. Marsh know to expect you for a full day on Wednesday during the next period rotation.”

Except on Wednesday I'm being arraigned, he thought.

He nodded, shook his superintendent's hand, despite the urge to spit in the man's face, and trudged toward the library. He whispered the prayers in his head from this morning. Surat al-Fatiha. Falaq. Ikhlas. Despite his best efforts to remember God for comfort, as soon as he was welcomed by the smell of dust and peeling paint in the library, all he could think about was how badly he wanted a drink.



9

KHALED

At the end of the school day, Khaled found himself crossing toward Alex's bright blue Jeep, tucked at the edge of the student parking lot. Khaled reached the car door and found Alex telling a story while Yassir sat slumped, his head resting on the passenger-side window. Khaled tapped the glass.

"Khaled!" Alex shouted excitedly, pulling the window down and startling Yassir awake. Yassir's mouth fell into a line at the sight of Khaled. Yassir hadn't seen or spoken to Khaled since Khaled had silently watched Yassir hold his stinging cheek as he was shoved into his father's cab. Khaled had sent him a text after his interrogation in Delpy's office, but it had gone unanswered.

"Are you both just sitting . . . around?" Khaled wondered.

"By sitting around do you mean Mikey being my therapist?" Alex asked. "Because yes. He's a good listener, despite the fact that he keeps falling asleep. Want in?"

"I need a ride home," Khaled said. "So I guess."

The door was unlocked and Khaled slid across warm leather into the back seat, staring at the dark brown curls that shone gold under the dim sunlight.

“Why are you here? Don’t you have a daughter to take care of?” Khaled asked.

To his surprise, Yassir responded. “My dad got a dispatch a few hours away. My mom doesn’t like driving when she has Yasmin because Yasmin always has a crying fit, and I’d rather eat my own hand than listen to Delpy remind me of my failing grades again and why I’ve disappointed her. So Alex’s cheese puff car it is.”

“I told you I’d air things out if the smell bothered you.” Alex sighed. The only thing Alex was addicted to more than iced macchiatos was twenty-ounce containers of cheese puffs.

“There’s a thing called the public bus,” Khaled said. “Runs until five for this route.”

“You know my dad doesn’t like me wandering off.” Yassir raised his middle finger, pointing with precision though his eyes were closed. “Also, don’t talk to me.”

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking *at* you.” Khaled groaned, seeing the Coors Light bottle tucked under the passenger seat. “You drinking?” Silence.

“No.” Alex eventually spoke for Yassir. “He said he wants to reform.”

“Subhanallah,” Khaled joked, but he also meant it. If Yassir had quit drinking, then he knew shit was serious. Yassir did not believe in God much, but maybe he believed in being sensible. Something Khaled needed to believe in again, too. Silence dragged on as Alex fiddled with the Jeep’s heater.

“Did *you* come to drink?” Alex asked after a moment. “Is that why you came over?”

Yes.

No.

“Of course not,” Khaled said, reformed, too, pushing down the uncertainty lingering with his words. “I came for the ride. Besides, on Wednesday—” The thought of the arraignment pinned him down in that moment, though he didn’t want to think about it. The car felt

stuff. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt. “Crack open a window, will ya? I’m getting stress palpitations.”

“It’s just toxic cheese puff inhalation,” Yassir muttered, and Khaled bit down a smile.

“What’s the verdict, anyway? You obviously didn’t get Wells fired today.” Alex rolled the window down, letting drops of rain sprinkle over his dirty-blond hair.

“I—well, I . . .”

“Spit it out,” Yassir muttered. “You got fucked over, didn’t you? I told you not to send the letter last week.”

Yassir avoided conflict at all costs. Which was perhaps why he was avoiding Khaled now, too. Khaled shrugged. “Well, I can’t let Mrs. Marsh spend first period alone.”

“The librarian?” Alex asked as he turned around to face Yassir, mouth agape. “Duuuuude. *You* got excommunicated?! Permanently?”

“Not yet—there’s an investigation happening. Delpy said she’d look into hallway camera footage and question whoever left the class last and might have seen the Wells meltdown. If this shit isn’t figured out soon, I won’t even be able to compete in the debate championship, since now I’m on academic probation.” Anger rose again in his body. “Damn this school.”

“Even the championship?” Alex inquired, tugging on Yassir’s gray hoodie sleeve. “You sure you didn’t see anything, Mikey? You’re always last to leave, since you’re always half asleep.”

“I didn’t,” Yassir said.

Silence filled the car as Yassir shifted in his seat; shades of brown and purple painted the left side of his light brown cheek. Guilt festered in Khaled’s gut, and he again eyed the beer bottle peeking from under the passenger seat.

I’m sorry, Khaled wanted to say out loud, in the silence of the Cheese Puff Jeep, but his words came out aggressive instead. Protective. “Ya Sayed, seriously? Cover that bruise on your face with a Band-Aid or something. People will think you’re abused or getting into fights.”

“This”—Yassir half turned, pointing at his cheek, suddenly seething—
“is all your fault and you know it. I don’t care about covering up your
mistake. I asked for a ride home, not to get arrested with every Iraqi I
know watching.”

“Arrested?” Alex yelled. “Why am I just hearing this now? It’s the
end of the damn school day!”

“Technically we weren’t arrested,” Khaled corrected.

“Fuck you and your technicalities, Khaled,” Yassir said.

“I didn’t ask your dad to slap you,” Khaled said.

Alex tapped a hand on Yassir’s arm. “Your dad did this, Mikey? Is it . . .
because of the baby?”

Yassir shrugged away at his touch. “It’s nothing.”

Alex frowned, shaking his head. “Wait, who got arrested? Why
do you two always keep me out of the loop! I thought we were three
musketeers? Amigos? The perfect triang—”

“Don’t talk to me,” Yassir said to Khaled, ignoring Alex. “I want nothing
to do with you, not until I know I’m not going to prison or something.”

“Prison?” Alex echoed.

“You won’t go to prison!” Khaled exclaimed. “I swear. I’ve been
praying all weekend that nothing will happen to us.”

“Praying?” Yassir scoffed. “Why don’t you do something that would
actually make a difference, Khaled?”

Khaled frowned. “Like what?”

“Go apologize to the gas station clerk! Maybe they’ll remove the
disturbance charge.”

Khaled stared at his friend incredulously. “Why would I apologize
to those assholes?”

“Because for once in your life you need to learn to shut the fuck up!”
Yassir fully faced him now. “Go and get Wells fired. Will it make you
feel better? Will it make your intoxication charge go away? Or mine?
No. Just go and do what you want, Khaled, you’ve never asked anyone’s
permission anyway.”

Why did you tell Baba about what happened at school? Ayah's voice had seethed in his ear as they watched Baba storm from the house. Don't you know each time you make a fuss it makes our lives worse? Everyone at school is making fun of him now, too.

Khaled stared at his best friend. Was this making his life worse, too? "What does Wells even have to do with you?" he asked.

"What do you think? Everyone knows you're cousins," Alex said.

"We're not real cousins," Khaled and Yassir both said. Although Khaled had never minded if they were mixed up as real family—like they should have been before Kawther ruined everything—it bothered Yassir no end.

"I get secondhand bullying for being your best friend," Alex said. "And Michael is stared at like a monster. Kind of like how everyone looked at you during your presentation."

"Is that true?" Khaled asked, turning to Yassir. It wasn't that he was oblivious, but it wasn't like Yassir could just easily escape stereotypes because he called himself Michael, either. No matter how many times he and Ayah used to tell him this, Yassir wouldn't let go of the fake name.

Alex nudged Yassir, eyes on the rearview. "Time to break up your fight. Yellow cab is approaching."

"Shit," Yassir swore under his breath, throwing his gray hood over his unruly hair and shoving himself out of the Jeep. "Bye, Alex."

"See ya, Mikey! Thanks for the thera—"

The door slammed.

"—py." Alex's words faded to a soft whisper. "You know, he's a shitty listener, but I can never get mad at Michael? Sometimes when I look at him, I just want to burst into tears. Maybe because we knew him before . . ."

Before he became a dad.

Before, when Yassir would do all the driving, all the laughing. Ayah was so fond of him, too, always saving room for him at the lunch table, even though he didn't join half the time.

Khaled watched his friend run to the end of the parking lot under the sinking sun, the yellow cab glowing under the shades of approaching maghrib.

So much about Yassir had changed.

But not their friendship.

“Don’t yell at him so much, either—I was going to fight you if you had really punched him. Don’t you ever think it’s our fault he’s in such a bad place? We’re the reason he got his first DUI and now you’re going back to court? Of course he’s terrified. He’s going to get it so much worse than you.” Alex sighed.

“He is?” Khaled asked. Last summer, Khaled and Alex had stupidly left bottles in Yassir’s rusty Camry and he’d gotten pulled over after missing a stop sign. He barely even drank that day. But he was the one who got in trouble.

Khaled stared at the ceiling of the Jeep.

The guilt now seeped deep into his bones.

Alex was right.

“What do you think I could do?” Khaled asked, his voice thickening. “To help him, I mean. He obviously won’t let me talk to him.”

“Well, be nicer—he’s a sensitive kid. And, I don’t know, plead guilty? Make sure he doesn’t get charged with anything. It will be your first time—so they’ll go easy on you. Give you community service or something.”

Khaled raised an eyebrow. “How do you know so much about the law?”

“My parents are divorce attorneys, duh. They used to make me go to Future Lawyers of America summer camp.”

“That’s a thing?” Khaled asked.

“Unfortunately, it’s very much a thing. Imagine seventh graders in pantsuits and smacking each other with gavels. It was chaos!”

It was definitely something Kawther would’ve begged their parents to let her attend if she had known it existed. Of course, Khaled could verify this advice with her, too, if he was actually talking to her.

While Khaled would not apologize to the gas station clerks, taking the fall for last Friday's events was the least he could do. Just like his prayers, he would keep atoning for what he'd caused. He owed Yassir at least that.

Alex put the car into reverse. "Still need that ride home?"

"Yeah," Khaled said reluctantly, watching the yellow cab disappear into the distance. "Take me home."



10

YASSIR

FORTY-FOUR DAYS BEFORE

“Yassir.” Mama’s tired voice broke as she placed a freshly bathed Yasmin in his arms. “She has a fever again.”

The minute Yasmin had seen him after school today, she’d opened her mouth wide and bit his face, rubbing her aching gums against his cheek. She looked as plump as the day she came into his life, but her eyes were much bigger, wider, and lighter brown, her curls damp against her face. Mama was right, her skin was too warm.

Yassir’s chest panged with guilt. He took the syringe filled with pink liquid medicine from his mother’s hand and attempted to put it in his daughter’s mouth.

“Just like this, Yasmin,” he said, his voice soft as he opened his mouth wide. He waited until she opened up her mouth wider, laughing; then he pressed the plunger. But instead of the pink syrup filling her mouth, it dripped all over her face and onto his lap. Yasmin stared at him in confusion before letting out a guttural scream—the kind that made his bones shake.

“Not like that,” Mama sighed, her graying hair loosening from her ponytail.

She grabbed Yasmin from him, settling the baby over her black night dishdasha. Yassir stared at his mother, who easily got the medicine into Yasmin’s mouth.

“Just go to sleep, habibi,” she told him, her eyes filled with empathy. “I got it.”

He hesitated, seeing the exhaustion in the grimace on Mama’s lips. He knew she was sick of correcting him.

That’s not how you change a diaper, she’s leaking everywhere.

That’s not how you feed her, she’ll choke.

That’s not how you put her to sleep, she’ll suffocate.

Just as he was about to reach for his daughter, hoping for a second chance to prove himself, cold air pushed through the living room, along with Baba. He stepped inside, slipping off his brown loafers near the front door, a lime-green sibhah in his hand.

“What’s wrong with her?” Baba asked in Arabic, hovering over the decaying leather sofa, automatically pushing a light hand over Yasmin’s hair, just like Yassir had.

Nothing is wrong. Everything is wrong.

Mama shook her head, thin gray curls sticking to her forehead. “She’s just fevering.”

“Again?” Baba asked. Concern dripped in his tired voice, and Yassir’s rib cage burned.

I’m sorry she’s here. I’m sorry I ruined my life. I’m sorry it’s ruining yours.

“I’ll make an appointment,” Yassir said automatically. “I’ll make an appointment to make sure she’s okay. Here, let me try to—”

Mama clicked her tongue, patting Yasmin as Baba sighed.

“Just go to sleep,” Baba muttered. “Fatima will be here around seven tomorrow morning.”

Yassir couldn’t tell if scolds in Arabic from his parents or in English from his sister were worse. Fatima only came around to lecture him

lately, escorted him to appointments Baba didn't know how to handle; and like at many moments in his life, he was both grateful for and regretful about it.

Yasmin whined into his mother's shoulder, and Yassir dropped his arms to his sides. She didn't want him. She never wanted him in the evening, so used to Mama comforting her to sleep. Before Baba could remind him, Yassir twisted away, trudging to his bedroom, trying to push the tears behind his eyes.

The door jammed and he sighed, kicking away Yasmin's ocean-themed walker—a hand-me-down from Fatima's younger son, Yousef. Stacks of homework taunted him at the corner of his desk, and the floor was covered with Yasmin's toys. He grabbed a teething toy in the shape of an octopus that sat over his pillow and stared at the ceiling. He could hear Baba pass through his and Mama's bedroom, and then moments later, he could hear the Quran blasting from the living room.

So much for sleep.

At least Yasmin had grown used to the noise, probably the same way Yassir had when he was young—the sacred words stamped over his brain, even if he didn't quite understand their meaning. But the noise was different now. Yassir grew up with Khaled and Ayah bickering in the corner of the living room, both of their older sisters giggling on the sofa, Ali shushing them all as soon as salat commenced.

The sounds of home.

At least, what it used to be.

Yassir blinked. At some point, the Quran recording faded away. The hallway light flicked off. Doors clicked shut. And a deep quiet took over the house. Yassir asked his eyes to close, asked his brain to turn off, but when the tears wouldn't stop pounding behind his eyes, he sat up and grabbed his sneakers from the corner. He crept through the house and stepped through the garage, away from Mama and Baba's bedroom, from Yasmin, and walked into the darkness.



Not even half a mile into the night, his phone buzzed.

He closed his eyes, hoping that when he looked down, his lock screen would be an image of the starry night sky, a thin crescent moon glowing deep in the center. Ayah had drawn the picture for him. Another secret between them.

If I call you tonight, will you answer?

He would get up in the middle of the night just to speak to her. Knowing very well that when the sun rose and Khaled sat between them in the lunchroom, they would pretend that they hadn't spoken for hours the night before.

It didn't really matter what she talked about, Yassir just liked to listen to everything about her. They talked about everything and nothing. Reminiscing about their favorite memories as kids, about her fear of failure, or her relationship with her mother. Kawther had practically raised Ayah and Khaled herself until she left for law school, and Ayah had become resentful of both her maternal figures. But lately she had gone shopping with her mother, learned how to make traditional Iraqi meals, and their bond seemed to be mending. She spoke about wanting to become a graphic designer, even though her parents did not find that to be a decent career. Like his own parents, they approved of three professions: medicine, engineering, and law. Stubborn, she continued to pursue it.

It's not like I've given up on all my dreams, Yassir. I have just given up on you.

His phone kept buzzing, and when he opened his eyes, Yasmin's smiling face with marag dripping on her chin stared back him. Disappointment filled his chest, and he hated himself for it. Notifications popped into his phone like fireworks. All from *Sheikh Khaled*.

There were many things Yassir regretted in his seventeen years, but sharing his location with Khaled Al-Hakim made it to the top five.

Yassir ignored the message and found Ayah in his contacts. All the way at the bottom, where he'd hidden her.

Night Sky.

He wanted to call her, just to hear her voice.

Even though she'd blocked him before she left to marry a stranger from Ohio.

He wished, at least, he had saved her old voice notes. That he could go back and hear her laugh again, whispering *I miss you*, though she'd seen him nearly every day. He'd never admitted that he missed her, too.

Only now it was too late.

He lifted the phone to his ear and gave in to Khaled's messages instead.

My Yassir dumbass senses were tingling. Khaled's voice was thick with sleep. Unless by some chance he was drunk. Yassir hoped not. *One day I'm going to tell Yasmin that her dad was a reckless creep strolling around the neighborhood—in fact, is she around? Have her call me. I'm sure she's just dying to vent to someone about you. I've become an expert in pissed-off baby babble.*

Yassir rolled his eyes and played the next voice note.

I'm going to keep leaving voice notes until the stupid blue dot on my map—that's you, by the way—is back to its home address. I still don't understand why you're on this wandering bullshit. Remember when I used to disappear as a kid? You know how my dad got me to stop? He told me how a jinn took over my great-uncle's right leg. Khaled knew jinn stories were off-limits. Asshole. While Yassir's belief in Islam—or any religion—had slowly slipped over the years, he couldn't help but still believe in jinn. He went to the market in the middle of the night one day, then he began to kick the shit out of everyone, men, children, women, saying the devil was inside him. He ended up kicking some military officer, you know, one of Saddam's guys. Next morning, my grandmother asks for an imam to come over and secretly exorcise him, but it was too late. That evening, Saddam's men headed to the house, put a bag over my great-uncle's head, and shoved

him into a car. My family never saw him again. And if you think that's bad, let me tell you about my dad's neighbor . . .

Yassir turned the corner, the air crisp but not yet cold against his face, pausing the voice note about jinn before the fear could make his skin crawl, and found himself at the intersection near his old middle school. *Ass-here*, the kids would snicker, kicking him out of his chair. *No, my ass is here! Not yours.*

It was the first time Yassir was the only Muslim kid in school. The only kid from Iraq. The only kid who didn't know another kid, with the Al-Hakims on the other side of town, the richer side, without him.

Then, on the first day of eighth grade, his substitute science teacher had accidentally mistaken him for a kid named Michael, a dark-brown-haired boy who moved to the lower level of biology.

"Oh, sorry, that's not your name. How do I pronounce . . . Yasseer?" she had asked, her eyes widened with confusion.

"Oh, I actually go by that now," Yassir had said, nodding. "You can just call me Michael."

After a few weeks, *Ass-here* was retired from the school's vocabulary, and he never went back.

Yassir's phone buzzed, this time with a call from Khaled.

He stared at the caller ID photo of Khaled giving him the middle finger. He sighed, rejecting the call as he trudged up the block. After a few minutes of silence, he received another voice note.

If Yassir didn't turn back now, neither of them would sleep, and if he turned off his location, Khaled would probably call the police. Or worse, he'd show up himself. But Yassir didn't want to acknowledge Khaled, either. Friday night had been a wake-up call for their friendship. It should've ended when Yassir drove Ayah away, pushing their families farther apart than ever, but he was too ashamed to tell Khaled the truth.

After a few more steps, he pressed play on the next message. *Abu Yasmin . . . I saw you turn the corner. I know if you turn the next, you'll be able to take that shortcut back to your neighborhood . . . Abu Yasmin,*

Khaled's voice crooned softer and softer. *Go home, ya ihmar. Everything will be okay, I promise. Tomorrow I'm going to fix everything. Just show up on time, dress decent. It's all you have to do . . .* His voice sputtered into silence.

Fix everything? Was Khaled finally going to listen to Yassir and apologize to the gas station employees?

Yassir immediately called Khaled, but after several rings, it went to voicemail. He must finally have exhausted himself.

Idiot.

Yassir sighed, turning the next corner toward home, spotting the yellowed chimney on his parents' roof peeking out beneath the moonlight.

He let the coo of crickets fill his ears, the cold breeze dip deep into his lungs. He stared at the night sky again, watching the shimmering light of the stars and the clouds still visible in the glow of the streetlamp.

Then he dialed, this time for Ayah, hoping she'd miraculously answer.



SKY

Near the hospital, I spot a wide walnut-colored building painted in pale moonlight. It has aged over time. It stands tall, but parts of the windows have visibly decayed, rust eating the edges of its structures. Just like the hospital, it's the kind of building where humans change once they've entered it.

The last time I saw the whimper's family all together was in this exact spot. Two young women walked opposite each other, their eyes pasted to the wide concrete steps that stood before them, as a young man trailed close behind. Sadness sank deep into the lines of their cheeks. Tears streamed down only one face, yet anger was clear across each of their mouths.

It shocked me, to see them this way. I remember when they first arrived in this land, and when they lived in the land before it. I had seen the history of their pain, their loss, and the lives they had created with each other until this moment.

I wonder, would they still have entered that building if they had known that the last twenty years during which their lives had been intertwined would come to an end? Did they know that when they

stepped into that building, it would be the last time their families would be considered one?

If I could have warned them that day to stop, I would have. But I cannot interfere in the lives of humans as much as they interfere in mine. Had I known what was to come, I would have shifted the clouds, changed the winds, ignited a storm. But as I said, I cannot see the future. I can only observe and remember. Yet I cannot help but wonder, if they had not entered, if the whimper had had his entire family behind him and not just the one he was born to, would he still have met his fate?

But I know better. It did not start there, on those concrete steps.

Before the whimper, there was the crying girl who had not been protected. And the boy who saw unspeakable things. And before that, the boy who chased after people who did not love him enough to look back.

The events that led to the whimper's tragedy—the failures of humans—stretch farther back in time, back to a country his parents were forced to flee long ago.