

DRIVING BY STARLIGHT

*Driving
By
Starlight*

ANAT DERACINE

GODWINBOOKS

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DEDICATION [TK]

1

INSH'ALLAH

Do you ever think about leaving?" I asked Mishail, careful to keep my tone casual.

"Lean back, or you'll get shaving cream on the carpet," Mishail said.

"Serves you right for having a carpet in the bathroom," I said, not sure whether I was disappointed or relieved that Mishail hadn't answered my question. I thought about adding a clarification. *I mean, someday. If it were even possible.*

"I can't believe you've never done this before," Mishail said. "Do I have to teach you everything?"

"Yes," I said, hoping she could hear my gratitude.

"You're so ridiculous. Anything involving real life and you're as useless as a six-year-old."

I scowled. I could fix electrical appliances, manage household finances, and carry home bleeding chickens from the butcher, but as far as Mishail was concerned, if you didn't have your own personal style, wear makeup, or dance, you had no practical life skills.

"Just watch what you're doing, or I'll throw you down the stairs."

"You won't hurt me," Mishail said, sounding so smug. I felt a prick of annoyance. Mishail was far too trusting. Last week, when we ditched school to get ice cream, I read the street signs, avoided SUVs that might have been religious police, and navigated crossing the four-lane highway to get to the store across the street. Mishail twirled sunflowers and stopped to pet stray cats, completely oblivious to the men who turned to look at her.

The ice-cream store had the usual sign that all restaurants did when they didn't have a family section—WOMEN AND ANIMALS NOT ALLOWED. Mishail didn't even see it, didn't notice that the guy gave us free ice cream to get us out before any police saw us inside. And on the way back to school, while I plotted excuses in case we were caught, she giggled madly because her mouth was frozen and she was high on sugar. At some point, she laughed so hard she collapsed in a heap, leaving me to practically carry her back.

As if we weren't conspicuous enough, two girls loitering unescorted on the streets of Riyadh in the middle of the day. It was a miracle we hadn't been arrested.

"No, I don't think about leaving," Mishail said, concentrating on the razor's path. "We're not going to get scholarships. No sense in getting our hopes up. Besides, my father won't even let me stay over at your *house*, and yours . . ."

I bit my lip, wondering why I'd asked the question when I knew what the answer would be. Sometimes we fed each other's madness. Sometimes Mishail said, "Sabiha Madam is coming back after her baby, let's surprise her with balloons," and I said, "What if there were so many balloons in the classroom that she had to burst them even to get in?"

But sometimes we had to burst each other's bubbles. Mishail's jaw clenched. I knew she didn't want to finish her sentence.

Say it, I prayed silently. Say it so I won't have to. Say it, and I won't hope anymore.

"*Insh'allah*," Mishail said, instead, and my stomach did a somersault. *If God wills.* "Maybe your father will come home by the time we graduate."

"*Insh'allah*," I agreed. "Maybe by then the law will change, and we won't need their permission."

Our eyes met. We'd been doing this for years now, stoking the fires of each other's hopes even though all reasonable people knew there was no way out. The sane thing to do was to keep your head down and do what you were told, so the *muttaween*, the religious police from Al-Hai'a,

the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, wouldn't take away what little freedom you still had.

"The olive dress is going to look incredible on you," Mishail said. "Lift up."

I raised my arms so Mishail could reach my armpits with the razor. Her breath huffed against my face, soft like everything about her. Someday, I promised myself, I'd understand what it was about Mishail that made us love her with the kind of devotion that started and ended wars. Of course she was beautiful, but not in the movie-star way, and that wasn't it at all. Mishail's gift was that her every word felt like a hug. She smiled at strangers with the innocence of never having had to bargain down vendors at the *souq*.

I was different.

"You walk as if you're angry with the world, as if you've got a knife hidden in your shoes," Mishail had said once. My mother had said it differently, and she'd used *that* word, the one that always made me so angry I couldn't even think.

"Everything about you is so . . . *sharp*. Your mind, your voice, your shoulders, even your walk. You remind me so much of your father."

"Stop that," Mishail said, slapping my cheek lightly as I frowned. "Why do you always worry so much? Why can't you just be excited about tomorrow?"

As far as our plots and pranks went, this one was going to be simple, but we were still going to give it everything we had. People who didn't really know Mishail, who saw only the minister's daughter and never the girl, thought she was the most perfectly mannered lady they'd ever met. That it was only my bad influence that got her in trouble.

They don't know, I thought. The girl wolfed down entire *shawarmas* in thirty seconds flat, invented naughty versions of Disney songs, and had lace lingerie smuggled in from an aunt in Paris hidden in the crevice of the air conditioner. The girl could tune out the world for hours only to return to it with the wisdom of a demented Moses, saying calmly, "Before we graduate, we should paint the school wall fuchsia."

Only I knew that Mishail.

A man's voice boomed below us. "HOW MANY TIMES do I have to—"

Mishail flinched, and the razor cut me.

Sorry, Mishail mouthed.

I shook my head. *Not your fault*. The minister had that effect on everyone.

"I'm so sorry," Mishail said. "He gets worse every—"

"Are you sure I won't look stupid?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject. There was one certain way to ruin an evening, and that was letting Mishail talk about her father. "I don't know how to carry myself in a dress, and I feel like a giraffe in heels."

"We'll practice," Mishail said. "If you're not going to care about what you wear, why complain about the *abaya*?"

Mishail had a point. I fought the flutter in my stomach. Sure, it was against school rules to wear anything but the uniform, but that wasn't what was bothering me. Leena Hadi did not wear dresses, had never worn dresses, and wanted to punch the color pink in the face.

A loud knocking at Mishail's bedroom door startled us. Mishail's mother said, "Girls, I want you both down for dinner in five minutes flat."

"It's not fair," Mishail said. "He yells at her, so she yells at us to feel better."

"Don't," I said, toweling off. My legs tingled. "Just think about tomorrow."

Mishail said nothing.

I squeezed her wrists. "Hey, we're not them. Nothing they do can touch us. Remember?"

"We'll have to smuggle the clothes in our schoolbags," Mishail said, relaxing with a sigh. "The park is walled, so there should be no religious police to worry about, only teachers. We'll change in the bathroom and cover up with the *abayas*."

We ate dinner in silence, three women huddled over the table in the kitchen. In the living room, the minister sat with Mishail's brothers. It hadn't always been this way, women in one room, men in the other, sharing dishes by passing them silently through the barely open doorway. All

that happened after Mishail's father became part of the government. Before that—

There was no use thinking about the past.

Still, it was better than being at my house, with my mother running around the kitchen trying to cook five dishes at once for a delivery order that was already late, while Fatima Aunty gave apocalyptic sighs and made delicate comments about our “unfortunate situation.”

“He’s in jail,” I said once, shutting her up momentarily. “Just say it. Do you know how many people’s fathers are in jail in this country? It’s practically normal. Just pack the hummus.”

“So, Leena, are you excited about Al-Kharj tomorrow?” Mishail’s mother asked.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “It’s the one day of the year we’re allowed to be outside.”

“Just be careful,” Mrs. Quraysh said. “If you’re out in the sun too long, you’ll become dark. Don’t sit on the grass. And no matter what you do, don’t use the bathrooms. That’s how you get MERS.”

I choked on my laugh. Mishail’s toes pinched my calf under the table, but her expression didn’t change. How did Mishail stand this day after day? I had to pack my own lunches, but most days Mishail wasn’t allowed to brush her own hair. I wondered which was worse.

No wonder she wants to let loose tomorrow, I thought, and my mind returned to the olive dress Mishail had picked

out for me. My stomach settled. If it would make Mishail happy, I'd gladly dance around in a clown outfit in front of the headmistress herself.

We settled in beside each other on Mishail's bed. She wasn't allowed over to *my* house, not when there was "no male authority figure to keep the women in check," as the minister put it. But I could stay here, as long as I stayed out of the minister's way. There was never a night that I didn't want to stay in Mishail's coral-toned bedroom, with the magazine clippings of our favorite pop stars hidden under the mattress and Mishail's phone under the pillow playing music until we fell asleep.

The alternative was listening to the soft scratching of cockroaches and the clipped, drip-drip sounds of my mother's sobs through the wall. Once, I tried to comfort her, but she just screamed at me to go away. I understood. The last thing I wanted was anyone seeing how miserable I really was, either.

Mishail curled into my outstretched arm with a contented sigh, and I pushed the bangs out of her face. There was a saying that the strength of an Arab woman was that she slept through the scorpion's sting so her husband's rest was undisturbed. If my nightmares ever woke Mishail, she never let me know. And she never complained.

I fell asleep slowly, wondering if I'd have another of the dreams where I could fly.

The dreams weren't complicated. They always began

the same way, with my sneaking out of the school auditorium while everyone else was at an assembly, and stepping out onto the football field, where we weren't allowed to play because it was obscene for women to jump around. I'd start sprinting so fast that my feet would leave the ground, the folds of my black *abaya* no longer getting between my legs but spreading out like falcon wings. I'd fly over the ten-foot-tall school wall, past Al-Hai'a buzzing around in their tinted vans, and headed straight for Riyadh's Kingdom Tower. The dreams had gone on so long that the ups and downs of flying were now as familiar as the buoyancy of an elevator.

This high up, the pincers of the tower and the sky-bridge that connected them were lit, crackling and alive with electricity. All I had to do was go through, thread the needle, and I'd be free. Just then, I'd see Mishail's face, gazing up at me from below or reflected in a window, and I would plummet to the ground. I'd wake up with a gasp from the fall, heart racing until I saw Mishail fast asleep by my side.

Leaving meant leaving Mishail. It was never going to happen.

2

H A R A A M

Al-Kharj! Even the name was as crisp as the city's lush orange orchards. The leaf-green minarets along the road were such a change from the flat red plateau of Riyadh. I ached to open the windows, but the train of school buses heading down the highway had dark contact paper on the locked windows so nobody could see the girls inside.

A white pickup truck rolled up beside our bus, young immigrant boys standing up on the flatbed to feel the breeze. They craned their necks to see us.

"So desperate! I think they're looking for Mishail!"

"Who *isn't* looking for Mishail? Look at how red she's become."

The boys wore tight jeans instead of the white *thobes* Saudi men were expected to wear. *Modern guys*, I thought with envy. My jealousy only increased when the boys turned up the radio and started dancing to a remix of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" with Ya Khadija. Their bright, checkered headscarves fluttered against their tasseled leather jackets.

"In September or in June, boys must have their jackets," Mishail said, hiding her face in my headscarf.

"Let them roast! Don't we have to burn in our *abayas*?" I said.

"You talk as if you don't think they look good in them," Mishail whispered to me. I blushed, and Mishail laughed softly against my burning ear.

"Shouldn't they be wearing seat belts?" Aisha asked, ever the practical one.

"Seat belts? First, they need to sit inside the car, and they're too cool to stop dancing," I said as harshly as I could so the other girls wouldn't think I liked boys. I knew that behind my back they sometimes called me *Leena Adhaleena*, which meant *Leena who goes astray*. But there was a big difference between breaking school rules and breaking the law. Colored clothes could get you sent to the headmistress's office. Boys got you beheaded.

I grinned at Aisha, who along with Sofia and Bilquis was part of today's conspiracy. I had drawn them maps from my memory of last year's trip. The maps marked the

location of the bathrooms, the clearing where the teachers would collect for a break, and the uncharted area behind the hill, which would be our party location.

"It's just that it's our last year together," Mishail had said last week, her gaze low, as if she were confessing to a terminal illness. "I'm sick of the same old class photos. All of us in three rows, standing-sitting-kneeling, hands to our sides as if we're in the army, nothing but our eyes showing from a mountain of black *abayas*. That's just not us, is it?"

Mishail was brilliant. Ask the girls to break a stupid rule for their own fun, and they'd turn into religious nuts in five seconds flat. But cry to them about love and friendship and last time together, and they'd follow in a heartbeat.

Aisha, Miss Practical, had, of course, been concerned about all the details. How were we going to coordinate, when would we do the switch, what was the signal, how were we going to get any photos taken? Aisha's anxiety was a new development. She used to show up to school wearing nothing but underwear under her *abaya* when the days got too hot for the full-sleeved, ankle-length uniform. Sabiha Madam had suspected something and asked her to take it off. I came to Aisha's rescue, saying, "But, ma'am, isn't it *haraam* to ask a woman to take off her *abaya* if she doesn't want to?"

Now Aisha cared about the details. Thankfully, she hadn't fully converted to being a good girl, and she owed me, at least a little. But she had a point about the photos.

Even if it wasn't *haraam*, all women's cell phone cameras were smashed at the time of purchase. When it didn't make my blood boil, I thought it hilarious that the white-bearded *imams* of the Permanent Committee for Religious Research were so scandalized by the possibility of women taking indecent duck-faced selfies that they found the need to issue a *fatwa* against it. Mishail and I had even made up a song about it. These days, one of us had only to hum the tune to set the other one off in a fit of giggles.

Everything is *haraam*,
Don't believe me, ask the *imam*.
Wearing perfume, not wearing perfume
Boys and makeup will take us to hell,
Skirts and swimsuits and TV as well.
Everything is wrong,
Even singing this song.

"I have a pocket camera," Mishail had said. "My brother got it from duty-free this summer. It's small enough that they'll never find it on me. We'll post the photos to a private account."

"You promise it'll be private?" Aisha asked.

"We promise," I said, looking at Mishail for confirmation; we'd been speaking in the first person plural for as long as I could remember. "This is just for us, not for outsiders."

"Will we be taking off our *hijab*?" Bilquis asked. "I mean,

colored clothes are one thing, but showing your hair is serious."

"Actually, the idea of *hijab* never appears anywhere in the Quran," I said. "The *jilbab* does appear in the Hadith, but even then—"

"Oh, shut up already, Leena Lawyer," Sofia said. "We're not your freedom fighters. We'll do whatever we feel comfortable doing, okay? Stop showing off."

"I wasn't!" I said, embarrassed.

"That's all we want anyway, to be ourselves," Mishail said, making peace.

The school buses pulled into the walled orchard of Al-Kharj. We got down fully veiled, and then the bus drivers and male staff left the park. The headmistress shut the gates, and with a glorious roar, all five hundred of us threw off our *abayas* and started running to explore. We seniors headed for the best clearing, the one by the water fountain on which other seniors had been etching their initials since even before we were born. Aisha, Bilquis, Mishail, and Sofia waited quietly on a picnic blanket until our supervising teacher started nodding off. Then I climbed the nearest tree to ensure the coast was clear.

"Head for the walls," I whispered to the others when I got down. "Walk along the boundary until you see the bathrooms to your right. We'll change there. Don't all leave at once."

They spread apart, leaving the rest of the class behind.

I felt a small flutter of anxiety, but Mishail was probably right that these three could be trusted not to melt under the pressure. They'd proved themselves when they wore colored socks to school on Valentine's Day.

All five of us made it to the bathroom without incident, although Bilquis was panting as if she'd been in a fight. We changed in the stalls, squealing, giggling, daring the others to come out first.

Mishail and I shared a stall; she rolled her eyes at their hysterics. I was too nervous in my dress to respond.

"One second," Mishail said, and adjusted the shoulder strap. "Okay, let's go."

I stepped out, and everyone fell silent. Blood rushed to my ears. Just when I was about to run back into the stall and cancel all the plans, Sofia whistled in her frank way and said, "*Mash'allah*, you have nice legs."

Mishail's eyes said, *I told you*.

"Once we're out of this bathroom, we'll need to run," I said.

"Run?" Bilquis said. "You didn't say that before. I can't run."

I ground my teeth. Girls were always such fools the first time they tried something rebellious. As if they thought all there was to it was having the idea, and they'd be transported daintily through their magical fantasy without being caught.

"At least it's not like when we had to climb out of my

window using the rope ladder," Mishail said. "Remember that?"

"Or when we had to tie plastic bags on our feet because the storm drains were clogged," I said. "Look, guys, things don't always work out as planned. We just have to adapt."

"You're both crazy," Bilquis said, pulling her large, baggy skirt in all directions, as if trying to find something in its folds. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Come with us or don't," I said. "It's entirely your choice. But we can't stay here where anyone can find us."

Bilquis swayed in the entrance of the bathroom while Mishail, Aisha, Sofia, and I dashed to the walls, hiding behind trees when we could. I felt something tickling my legs and shivered, realizing it was the first time since I was a child that my skin had been exposed to the air. Goose bumps appeared where the soft olive dress rested against my thigh, so I pulled the dress down awkwardly.

Aisha appeared at the tree immediately to my right, wearing what appeared to be an extra-large T-shirt over skinny jeans. A wide belt cinched the T-shirt in at her waist. The four of us arrived at the clearing without any other issues. "Even if nothing else happens, we did this!" Sofia said, throwing her hands in the air. She had on a sleeveless hot-pink blouse with a deep V-neck, and I felt simultaneously embarrassed and envious. My breasts were tiny, so small that I could still get away with passing as a boy. It was convenient to run errands, but that didn't mean I didn't want Sofia's or Mishail's curves.

Mishail pulled out the camera. Without warning, she starting singing. Mishail had never been allowed to practice her singing except to recite the Quran, but her voice was so delicate, like the sound of the first rain, that we squealed and clutched one another and started dancing. We were so wild with joy.

Just then, Bilquis appeared.

She was wearing her regular uniform, which should probably have prepared me for the scornful way she laughed and said, "*Wallah*, Leena, prancing like a frightened horse isn't the same thing as dancing."

I turned to her in fury.

"Ignore her," Sofia said, grabbing my arm. "Miss Too Fat to Run is hardly the authority to comment on your dancing skills."

"You girls think way too much of yourselves," Bilquis said. "This is *haraam*, and I'm going to tell the headmistress before it gets out of control."

And she stalked off.

Mishail gasped. It yanked me into action.

"Everyone, get changed," I said. "We can't wait to get back to the bathrooms. When you're done, hand over your clothes. No sense in all of us getting in trouble."

There was no time to waste. I quickly shimmied out of my dress and into my uniform.

"Now," I said when the other girls hesitated. "The faster you do it, the less chance anyone will see you. Mishy, give me the camera."

I took Aisha's T-shirt and nodded in approval as she pulled the drawstring of her uniform skirt around the skinny jeans. For the first time, I felt glad of the baggy, unflattering robes that were our uniform. So much could be hidden under them.

"Run," Mishail said. "And no matter what, don't tell anyone anything."

Aisha and Sofia took off immediately, and Mishail gave me an expectant look.

"Never," I said. I held out my hand until Mishail dropped the camera into it. I put it in my underwear.

Mishail's grin was blinding.

We walked back together to the rest of our classmates. The other girls gave us looks that were part fear and part envy, telling me that Bilquis had spread the story beyond just the headmistress. So everyone knew.

Bilquis came to the clearing, looking annoyed instead of triumphant.

"She said she'll deal with you when we're back in school," she said loudly. "Not here."

Mishail sagged in relief.

"If I were you, I'd be nervous," Bilquis said. "She looked really angry."

"If I were *you*, I'd start learning how to run," I said.

Nervous titters ripped through the clearing. I pulled Mishail in for a hug. Aisha and Sofia joined us, as did a few others who were no longer worried about showing whose side they were on.

"Hey, Leena," Mishail said.

"Hm?"

"Don't sit on the grass."

I burst into laughter.

A couple of hours later, when the buses were back at the school, the four of us were escorted to the headmistress's office. I put my palms on my thighs, little finger slightly apart from the rest. The others watched it carefully, as I'd instructed them.

One, I thought, hoping telepathy was real and the others could hear me. *We're in Phase One*.

The key to handling Maryam Madam was recognizing the phases of her anger and waiting them out quietly. Mishail was so attuned to it now that she could keep her head down in perfect ladylike surrender while picking up clues just from the headmistress's voice.

That was anger in the headmistress's tone now, of course, but with the spice of outrage that always accompanied the discovery phase. It was as if Maryam Madam believed that anyone who broke the rules had some deep ulterior motive. When we were caught for the Valentine's Day incident, it was ten minutes of *But WHY SOCKS? What were you REALLY after?* until we entered Phase Two.

"Mishail, what would your father say? What if a man had seen? Why do you girls take such stupid risks for no reason?"

Mishail's ring finger unfolded from her clenched fist. I did the same thing, indicating that we'd entered the second

phase: questions. This, too, required no response. Maryam Madam would eventually arrive at the explanation that she liked the most and express her complete disappointment as she entered Phase Three.

"I'm so disappointed in you girls. You should be ashamed of yourselves. What kind of role models are you to the young women of our country? Is this worth risking your reputation? Your future? I should make you stand in your underwear so the other girls can point and laugh."

Mishail's head rose almost imperceptibly. Phase Four was creative punishment, and it signaled the end of the cycle. It was only at this juncture that speaking was of any use. I tried to mimic Mishail's look of deep penitence. I probably just looked as if I were in pain.

"We're sorry, ma'am," I said. "We weren't thinking."

"Sorry? I'll show you sorry. Whose idea was this anyway?"

I never understood why the headmistress always asked questions that were impossible to answer. Searching for the origin of our ideas was like trying to pull apart salt and water. It was always one of us saying something and the other saying *yes, yes and also* until even learning to ride a bicycle involved climbing out a window on a rope, and then using it to tie ourselves to one another so one could pull the other along with Rollerblades.

"Last chance. One of you could get punished, or all of you can. So who was it?"

"Me," we said together, and then dropped our heads immediately to hide our grins.

Maryam Madam pinched her temples. I took advantage of the headmistress's closed eyes to mouth *It'll be okay* to the others. All said and done, Maryam Madam was not so bad. She was practical, and if you listened carefully, she always seemed less annoyed at someone's having broken the rules than at their getting caught. It was all, *what if the police and think of your parents* and never anything as preachy as Rehmat Madam's "A woman without a *hijab* is like a chair with two legs" or the slogan of Al-Hai'a—*A modest woman needs no mirror*.

"I'm going to get nothing out of you while you're all together," the headmistress said. "You three, go back to class and remain standing for what's left of the day. I need to talk to Leena alone."

3

T U F S H A N

The headmistress opened her mouth to continue, but I shook my head, glancing at the shadows moving below the door. Maryam Madam's eyes rolled upward, as if praying for patience.

"Girls, I know you're listening on the other side."

The shadows cleared, but I waited for the footsteps to disappear down the hallway before I reached into my underwear and pulled out the camera. The headmistress drew in a sharp breath.

"You know how dangerous that is, right? If a photo of the minister's daughter were to get spread around the Internet—I mean, don't you remember the death threats against Princess Basmah when she was caught without her *hijab*?"

“That was different! She was *smoking*. This was just—”

I trailed off at the headmistress’s skeptical look. I really didn’t know what it was that drove me and Mishail to do these mad, dangerous things. Mostly Mishail, but I had to admit it set my blood on fire, too. Maybe it was something of that *tufshan* my father used to speak of, the strange restlessness that happened to boys from poor families with no *wasta*, no political connections with which to secure their future. At night they could be heard drifting in stolen cars on Dromedary Lane.

Hormones, my mother had said when I asked what *tufshan* meant.

Don’t lie to her, my father had said. *Tufsh is the way a man moves when he’s drowning. Stuck between fighting and giving up.*

I knew the feeling well now. It wasn’t only boys who knew they had been cheated so the thousand grandchildren of this country’s founder would never have to work a day in their lives. If *tufshan* drove them to vandalism and crime, to us girls, who could not even do those things, it just drove us mad.

I tried to read Maryam Madam’s thoughts. Her silver-streaked hair was tucked neatly into a ponytail. The corners of her eyes were wrinkled and kind. She looked exactly as she had when I saw her for the first time, back in the sixth grade, when she was just a mathematics teacher, the newest member of the school staff.

I would never forget that day. We had been planning how to make sure the new teacher saw things our way.

Too often new teachers came in wanting to prove that they could handle the job and screamed themselves hoarse over stupid things like heart-shaped pendants or ear-phones under the headscarf, starting a war that ended only when we used the ultimate weapon. We mixed red food coloring with Vaseline and dabbed the teacher's black chair with it to stain her backside when she sat down. It meant public humiliation, threats, tears, and a new teacher, which wasn't actually good for anybody. So we were thinking of something smaller, just to show her where the line was.

But the minute Maryam Madam walked into the classroom, it fell silent, not because she'd screamed "Shut up!" or "Pin-drop silence!" as other teachers had done, but because she had a way of drawing everyone's eyes to her, and making all of us want to hear what she had to say. She held a giant protractor, with a chalk attached at one end, and wielded it as if it were a sword. She got straight to the lesson, and when I ignored her to play tic-tac-toe with Mishail, she whirled around and threw a piece of chalk that landed between my eyes like a bullet.

"You think I don't see you," Maryam Madam said. There was no anger in her voice, just crinkled-eye amusement that was more effective than any whip. "But I know who you are, Leena Hadi. And I know you're used to having your way around here. I can see you trying to control the class from that corner of the room. You think that

because this stuff comes easy for you, you are some kind of VIP? Why don't you come up here and solve this, then, if you think you can?"

The class had laughed, taking her side. So I stood, held my head up, and solved the problem aloud, adding that because we had an old edition, the answer at the back of the textbook was wrong. I was expecting Maryam Madam to get angry. Instead, her eyes sparkled, and she clapped as if she'd been given the birthday present she'd most wanted. She also seemed to recognize my father on parent-teacher night, because her face lit up at the words *Hadi Mutazil* as if that name meant something to her. They debated politics for an entire hour while other people's parents stood off to the side and whispered about it.

"A remarkable woman," my father had said afterward, as if he couldn't feel the rage my mother was pouring out underneath her *abaya*. "It's a pity about her husband, but I can't imagine it's anything but a relief. Especially since she's now financially independent."

After the arrest, when I spent my days staring out the window to avoid Mishail's concerned glances, and my evenings walking around the streets to avoid my mother's shell-shocked face, it was the headmistress who kept me from the edge of that final cliff. Those rough, chalk-covered hands slapped me, dragged me out of the bathroom by my ears, bandaged my bleeding forearms, and then slapped me again.

"We're on the same side, Leena," Maryam Madam had said, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "I promised your father I'd take care of you, but I can't do it if you're going to set the world on fire. You think I want to be the enemy here? You think I'd do this if I didn't love you? I want what's best for you, and that means making sure you survive your own incredible stupidity."

The words she used were so close to those horrible ones from Rowdha Yousef that were ruining my life—*My Guardian knows what's best for me*—but they felt so different coming from the headmistress. In those days, after the unrest of the Arab Spring, Rowdha petitioned the country's *Majlis* to keep the rules in place that prevented women from acting without the support of their male guardians. Rowdha believed women shouldn't be allowed to drive or even go to the roadside *bakhala* to buy their own maxipads, because if women could take care of themselves, men would stop being respectful. Might even leave.

As if my father had chosen to be dragged away from his family by the *mahabith*, leaving us so paralyzed.

"What do you want to do?" the headmistress asked now, interrupting my memory.

"I'd like to print out a few copies," I said. "And then you can delete the digital photos."

"I'll give you some time while I lecture the others."

The headmistress got up and headed out, locking me in for safety. I plugged the camera into her computer. The

photos came up immediately, and I blushed. Mishail was a talented photographer, but it was really strange and uncomfortable to see photos of ourselves like this. Sofia's chest glowed with sweat, as if she were a beach model. Aisha's photo was probably the most innocent. She looked irritable and hot. One photo caught me entirely by surprise. I was sitting on the grass, looking directly at Mishail, hands clenched at my sides as if gearing up for a fight. I wondered what had been going through my mind that I would look at Mishail with such intense anger. As if the universe were marking out the contrast, the next photo was of Mishail, whose gentleness and light eyes made her seem almost like a fairy painted into a field of flowers than a real girl.

These photos had no business being online, where anyone could get to them. We would each get a keepsake printout, and that would have to be enough. Sometimes it was as if Mishail forgot that her father was the minister of the interior, whose department owned Al-Hai'a as well as Saudi Telecom. They spied on all phone and Internet communications in the country. Not only did all our phones have apps that regularly pinged our guardians with our location, our fathers could always request the records to determine if there had been any inappropriate communications. Mishail *knew* this, so it was almost as if she were asking to be caught.

I was about to get up when I saw the headmistress's

e-mail pop up with a new message. I read the subject line by accident, and then froze in the chair.

I knew I had no business reading the headmistress's e-mail. I shouldn't even have registered that subject line, though I'd read it on autopilot. But it said *Majlis internship—Deadline for applications Wednesday, October 8.*

That was two weeks from today. I had heard about the program, of course. Now that women could finally vote and even be elected to the council, joining the *Majlis* was the dream of any girl interested in changing the law. Why hadn't the headmistress mentioned it before?

See, if you were a woman in Saudi Arabia, you dreamed of only three things. To marry a man you loved. To change Saudi Arabia. And to leave Saudi Arabia, at least for a little while. As for leaving, there were only two ways out—a KASP scholarship to a foreign university, which required a guardian's permission and more influential connections than I had, or being sold into marriage to the highest bidder, also with a guardian's permission.

So I didn't dream of leaving. And I didn't dream of love. But I did hope that one day I could change things, make our lives more bearable.

There was a sound in the hallway. Footsteps. The headmistress was on her way back. My finger hovered over the message. I had to know. If there was a way, even if it was just the glimmer of light underneath a locked door, I had to know.

I scanned the message swiftly, feeling the skin on the back of my neck prickle. My stomach felt both heavy and cold, as if I'd swallowed a block of ice.

Each school had to submit the names of two participants, who would debate the *sharia* law in a national competition. The winning team would receive full tuition and room and board at Princess Nora University and spend their summers working at the *Majlis*. The winning school would receive a grant that had so many zeros my eyes glazed over.

I marked the message as unread and pulled the photos back up to cover the screen. I went to the printer to hide my face as the headmistress returned. I didn't have Mishail's ability to completely mask my thoughts.

"They kept their mouths shut," Maryam Madam said. "I pretty much had to ask point-blank, *Did any of you bring a camera?* And even then, only Bilquis said anything."

The headmistress glanced at the colored printouts.

"Why do you children have a death wish?" she muttered, sitting at her desk. "Do you have any idea what the minister would do if he knew what the girls at his daughter's school were up to?"

I caught the headmistress's eye. There was no anger there, just exhaustion.

"You take great care of her," Maryam Madam said. "Better than any sister. I've deleted the photos. Here." She

handed back the camera. "You did the right thing telling me, Leena."

I frowned in confusion, and then realized I must look conflicted. I was, but not about this. Protecting Mishail came first, no question. The last five years had taught me that to survive, you had to work with the authorities, not against them, bear the scorpion sting if you had to, and I was going to make absolutely sure Mishail survived.

"God forbid any of you start messing around with boys," the headmistress said with a laugh. "This stuff, I can protect you from. If I ever find out any of you girls have betrayed my trust, have gone *there* . . ." She shook her head.

"We'll save that for when we're in university," I said, trying to jokingly guide the conversation back to where I wanted it. "I was thinking Princess Nora for law? Unless you have some other guidance?"

The headmistress fell silent. Her pensive face made me nervous. If I was being considered for the internship, wouldn't Maryam Madam be more excited?

"It'll be tough with your situation," the headmistress said, and my knees trembled. "Even if you're accepted into a university, you need his permission to go. I'll see what I can do. No promises."

I swallowed, trying not to let my disappointment show. I should've expected it. It didn't matter that I was at the top of my class. Merit didn't matter, not in this country. All that mattered was that my father had disobeyed the

government, protested against it, and so I would be punished for his sins.

I didn't want to ask any more questions, didn't want to think about what I would do with my life if I wasn't even allowed to study after high school.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day.

"Thank you," I said, and walked out. I had no memory of walking back to class. I didn't realize I was clutching the photos so hard I was leaving creases. Most of the girls were hurrying out to the school buses, but Aisha and Mishail were waiting in a corner.

"How'd you manage to do that?" Aisha said. "When Bilquis told her about the camera, we were sure you were in for a full strip search. We were expecting you to come back traumatized."

"I knew she would find out about the camera," I said. My voice felt dull and distant, as if I were reciting from a script. "While she was talking to you, I printed out the photos and hid the pages. She deleted everything from the camera, but printouts are better than nothing, right?"

A weight descended on my shoulders.

If I hadn't said anything, we'd have digital photos that would make us giddy with joy but could ruin our lives at any minute.

If I hadn't said anything, I could have had one more day hoping for a future that I knew now would never be mine.

“You’re such a genius,” Mishail said, swooping in for a hug. I lifted her off her feet and swept her in a circle, burying my face in her neck and exhaling a hot, heavy breath there. *Worth it*, I told myself. *Just for this moment, it was all worth it.*

4

BOYAT

When I walked with my mother on the street like this, I thought we must look like husband and wife to everyone else. Just another man and woman, nothing to see.

In the simple white *thobe* that all Saudi men wore, I was tall and thin, a sharp contrast to my mother, whose curves weren't concealed even by the shapeless black *abaya*. The checkered scarf and *ghutra* covered my hair, and I'd learned a few tricks over the last few years that made the disguise really work. Other girls had tried this, of course. So many that there was even a word for it: *boyat*. And men desperate for female contact had tried hiding in a black *abaya* and a face-covering *niqab* to get into the Ladies Kingdom at

Mamlaka mall or the women-only zones of Riyadh. But the security guards always caught them, just as the *muttaween* of Al-Hai'a usually caught the *boyat*.

But those women hadn't had to do this practically every day for years. It had usually been a one-time thing, a protest against the rules or an escapade. When it became a daily necessity, you learned quickly not to make mistakes.

I knew how to stand up straight, keeping my shoulders wide to take up more space. Hands had to be kept in pockets, not awkwardly squirming as if hunting for a phantom purse. The real challenge was in what you did with your eyes. Women were used to averting their gaze from other people and the surveillance cameras on the street corners, heads bent toward the ground. Men looked directly at other men, and if you were shifty, nervous, or didn't meet people's eyes, you were not *murwa*, not a man at all.

I had now spent years perfecting the Arab handshake. One long clasp, none of the sweaty firmness with which young, hairless boys tried to prove their manhood, none of the cold and brisk formality with which foreigners were greeted. This was a slow pull, a dance that took you cheek to rough cheek with another man for three quickly exchanged kisses. The first time I did it, with the grocery clerk, I felt dirty and terrified, and I cried all night. It was the first time I'd been touched by a non-*mahram* man, and I was convinced I had polluted my body in the eyes of God.

Maybe the grocery clerk had seen through the disguise the minute his lips touched my hairless cheeks.

All this drama just to run errands.

It was no wonder Mishail loved the challenge of undoing all that training to make me look girlie.

“Did you like it?” Mishail had wanted to know. “When he kissed you. Is he good-looking? Your first real kiss should be with someone good-looking, or it doesn’t count.”

At the thought of Mishail, I smiled, and the black cloud that had followed me since I found out about the internships cleared a little. Mishail was right. Our future was here, not in dreamed-up adventures we could never have. True, my entire world consisted of my mother and Mishail, and the two of them were spinning away from me with widening and haphazard orbits, as if without my father there wasn’t enough gravity to hold our solar system together.

But it was still more than others had, so I told myself to be grateful.

Except that my mother was pinching my elbow.

“Hurry up.”

I sped up, remembering that since it was traditional for women to walk a step behind men, when you were the “man,” you couldn’t get distracted by your thoughts and slow down to a leisurely stroll. Especially if the woman in question needed to get things done.

We stopped at the butcher first, and I played the

tiresome game of telephone between my mother and the supertraditional butcher, who thought that speaking directly to a woman would send him straight to hell.

"She says it's sickly. He says it's just athletic. She says that a healthy chicken should have a—what?"

Another pinch. A signal to move in closer to hear the whispered, "Don't tell him this, because you shouldn't be talking to a man about body parts. But a healthy chicken, or horse, or any other animal, should have large buttocks. The hind legs of this chicken are too small. Not enough exercise."

I sighed and pushed past the butcher, ignoring the indignant squawks from my mother and the sickly chicken, and searched the cages for a chicken with a fat behind.

"That one," I said, and the butcher yanked it out and held it up for inspection. When my mother nodded, I stepped aside so the butcher could weigh it while alive. He held it by its wings and turned it upside down. Too surprised to put up a fight, the chicken fell silent as the butcher slit its throat and allowed the blood to drain.

"Next?" I asked, pretending that carrying the plastic bag full of dead chicken and blood didn't bother me at all.

"Hossein. You remember the house?"

I frowned. There was something odd about the way my mother had mentioned my father's partner in their law practice. Nervous, as if the last time we'd seen Hossein hadn't been just last month.

“What do we need there?”

“I just need some papers signed. None of your business. Do you remember it or not?”

“Of course,” I said, “but it’s a thirty-minute walk.”

We headed there in silence until my mother said quietly, “I can’t set up a bank account without your father’s permission. I have to write a letter.”

I nodded, teeth clenched. I had a hundred questions—*What have we been doing for money so far? Where do you put the money from your catering business? Why do you want a separate bank account? Does that mean he’s never coming home?*—but I didn’t dare ask any of them.

I kicked the pebbles as we made our way out of the busy marketplace and into the residential area of Suleimaniya. Here, spacious white villas ornamented with bougainvillea alternated with ramshackle redbrick buildings with forbidding metal doors. The houses of Riyadh were usually, as the name said, *riads*, vast and ornate marble and mosaic, all windows facing the interior atrium, no windows facing the outside world. Which meant thousands of narrow, dirty alleyways filled with cats, cockroaches, green Dumpsters, and black garbage bags, but these might lead to large mansions concealed entirely from the outside world.

Like the women, hiding a kilo of gold jewelry and Prada heels under their abayas, I thought, eyeing my mother in her opaque black silks. *Full of secrets.*

"How do you do it, anyway?" my mother asked, breaking the silence. "Remember the way. Your father could do it, but I would get lost in my mother's house."

"I remember landmarks," I said, hoping I wouldn't have to explain further. I didn't want to share my memories. *That's the toy shop where he taught me how to change a battery. This road with slightly fewer potholes is where he taught me how to ride a bicycle. That's where we stopped to see the gray cat eat one of its children after giving birth.*

We arrived at the villa. It looked just like all the others, but I knew the one brick that was not like its neighbors. Hossein's son, Faraz, and I had once found a drill and decided to make a peephole at eye level to shoot enemies from. The replacement was smooth, painted wood, not brick, and I felt for it with my fingers.

I rang the bell before my mother could annoy me by asking if I was sure.

Faraz opened the door, and I felt another pinch at my elbow that meant, *Watch how you act around him.* My mother seemed to be under the popular impression that men, and boys in particular, were basically animals, unable to control themselves around women.

"I just don't want him getting any ideas," she'd said once. "You never know. And we have enough problems."

Faraz wasn't related to us, and so he wasn't *mahram* in the strict sense. But we'd grown up together since we were in diapers, and after years of pillow fights and video games

and shared lessons in law from his father, how was I going to see him as anything other than a brother?

“*Salaam aleikum,*” I said. “So can we come in or not? My mother has some work with your father.”

“Sorry, come in. He’s on the phone. Will you sit down?”

I watched Faraz carefully as he brought us tea. Mishail was always teasing me about him. Our families were from compatible tribes, so a marriage wouldn’t be illegal. Faraz knew about our situation. He wasn’t so rich that he could afford to marry anybody he liked. He wasn’t at the top of his class, but he wasn’t an idiot, either. But he was so young-looking, his cartoon eyes turning into pitying, soupy puddles any time he saw me. I also hated his beard. Mishail was delusional. Just because Faraz was the only boy I’d ever met, it didn’t mean I was going to marry him.

We sat quietly. In the background, the television played *Fatullah’s Facts*. Imam Fatullah jumped out from behind a green velvet curtain, clapped his hands together, and tossed his long, curly brown hair. Fatullah was the latest in a long line of self-proclaimed “hip” *imams* who had been caught for a street crime and then got out of jail quickly by turning into an *imam* as a demonstration of his commitment to Islam. The trend started with Abu Zekem, who stole and raced cars before being arrested and converting into a *muttawa*, helping the police arrest his former friends.

“*Bismillah-ur-Rahman-ur-Rahim*, and welcome, my young Muslims,” Fatullah said. “We have prepared a *tremendous*

show for you today, addressing the matters of *aqeedah* that weigh most heavily on your mind. Now, let me begin by reminding you that I am but His humble servant, and I do not offer my own opinions, despite what my opponents say. All truth comes from the *usul al-fiqh*, the Quran, the Hadith, and the *ijma*, and *that*, my friends, is one of—”

“FATULLAH’S FACTS!” chorused the audience, breaking into loud applause. I rolled my eyes.

“Is there nothing else on?” my mother asked Faraz, sounding pained. Faraz switched to the grainy, illegal foreign channels and settled on Al-Jazeera. The host was discussing an incident at KAUST. The prestigious university, the only coed one in the country, was temporarily closed, and students were protesting the closure while the *imams* and *muttaween* were celebrating their victory.

“It looks like things are heating up,” Faraz said. “The tension can’t—”

“Change the channel,” my mother said, an edge to her voice. Faraz flinched but obeyed immediately. I tried to apologize with my eyes. My mother had no further patience for the protesters and their revolution. Between her paranoia about government surveillance (which wasn’t really paranoia when your husband had been arrested for seditious activity) and her determination to avoid any reminders of the past, she rarely interacted with other people at all. Sometimes I thought she had forgotten how normal women behaved.

Speaking of “normal women,” some of those were on *Fatullah’s Facts*, asking the host questions from behind a mesh screen.

“Is it permissible to shape the eyebrows?”

“Is it *haraam* to name a baby Rahim?”

“If you dye your hair on earth, will your hair be dyed in paradise?”

“Is it still backbiting if we are warning our brothers and sisters about a person whose mistakes are known to all?”

But there wasn’t even the hint of a smile on Imam Fatullah’s face. He took every one of these stupid questions seriously, the camera zooming in on his perfect bronze skin and those big eyes with their ridiculously long eyelashes.

“*Walaikum assalam wa rahmatullah*,” Imam Fatullah said gravely, and then answered, “Remember what the prophet—peace be upon him—said of slander, that it is saying of another person that which he would not like. Even if what you say is true, you will be following in the footsteps of those hypocrites of Medina who slandered Aisha and were burned with hellfire and given only hot pus to drink as relief.”

Applause! What wisdom! What eloquence! I dug my nails into my thigh. How was it fair that a guy like this ended up on TV, rich and famous, with hordes of fools following his “legal” advice, while my father was still rotting away in jail?

Just then, Hossein appeared with his wife. My mother

stood, said, "Don't touch anything, don't say anything," and followed the couple into an office.

"No, I don't know why we're here," I said to Faraz before he could ask.

"I was going to ask if you wanted a Twix," he said.

I grinned. He handed me the bar he'd been hiding in his pocket.

"I hear the community is still active," Faraz said. "Waiting for your father, or for someone to take his place."

Faraz seemed about to say something more but stopped. I felt suddenly irritated. Mishail always said that you had to verify three things before having any interest in a man. He had to be at least two years older, attractive, and of the right horoscope. Everything else could be negotiated. But Mishail's accounting missed some pretty important qualities. For example, being able to have a conversation with a girl like a normal human. Not being in jail, headed for jail, or thinking about making life choices that would lead to jail, like talking about my father's "community" of rebels.

"Your voice," Faraz said. "You have your father's voice."

I frowned.

"I don't mean that you sound like a man. Just that you both speak the same way."

"And how's that?"

"As if you're commanding an army," Faraz said.

I looked away, landing on the various SAT and TOEFL

books scattered everywhere. The school world of boys was actually pretty similar to ours. By law, the boys' school had to be at least five kilometers from ours to prevent the ever-troublesome potential indecency. But boys had to study the same things, take the same tests, and try for the same scholarships.

"My father says I must go abroad to study," Faraz said. "What about you? What are your scores?"

I did a double take. I wasn't used to such direct questions. Girls were more subtle. None of them would admit that they studied at all or that they were trying for universities that might not accept them. At most, they might ask if a test had gone well, and even if you'd aced it, you had to say you did just okay or the others would think you were being proud, which was worse than being stupid.

"If people knew you were trying for something, they might try for it, too, or cast an evil eye," Aisha always said. She wrote *Bismillah-ur-Rahman-ur-Rahim* at the top of all her tests to ward off bad luck.

I said, "I haven't got the scores back yet. But I don't want to leave the country."

"Why not?" Faraz asked. "Many universities offer scholarships, and with your brains, you'd easily get one."

It was none of his business. So easy for men to just set out on their adventures, leave everyone else behind. Even if I could leave, even if every cell in my body ached for scholarships that I wouldn't get, what was I supposed to

do, abandon Mishail and my mother? Give up on my father?

I said the words I'd heard my father say a hundred times: "Better a prisoner in your own house than a guest in someone else's."

Faraz's face cleared, as if he'd just received some great revelation in my answer. The doorbell rang, and he went to answer it. I tiptoed to the closed door where my mother was talking to Hossein and his wife.

From beyond the thick wooden doors came a high-pitched noise that nearly made my heart stop. My mother was crying as if her heart had just been broken, a terrible, gut-wrenching sound.

I should have stayed to learn more, but I couldn't bear to hear it for another second. I backed away from the door and returned to the sofa in a daze. I'd been sitting there a few minutes when Faraz returned and said, "Looks like they're done."

Sure enough, the great wooden doors were open, and the three adults were coming out. I was glad my mother was wearing her veil, covering even her eyes. I didn't want to see the answers I knew I'd see, and I certainly didn't want Faraz to see her like that. Not that he would say anything, but still.

"So you managed to find us!" Hossein said, looking as if he'd been through a sleepless night. "Good girl, good girl. You take care of your mother now, you hear me?"

I nodded, irritated that he thought I wasn't already doing that.

"And you're studying hard? Your mother says you're going to study accounting, help her out with the catering business."

"Law," I said through my teeth. My mother's disapproval seeped through the veil.

"Same thing, of course," Hossein said obliviously. "Law and business, all about numbers. Sorting out inheritance, that sort of thing. Quick, what's three hundred and ninety-five times three?"

"One thousand, one hundred and eighty-five."

Hossein made a sound of amazed appreciation and asked a few more questions. "Any time you want a job here, it's yours," he said, laughing. "You can be my accountant, or maybe tutor this boy of mine in exchange for some"—he coughed discreetly as he whispered the word *driving* so only I would hear—"lessons."

Faraz blushed, and I gave Hossein a grudging smile.

"But no, that would be holding you back. You'll go far, no question about it. I think you're even sharper than your father was!"

Hossein must have realized from my expression that he'd said something wrong, because his voice fell to a mumble, and he showed us out. I walked briskly home alongside my mother. I wanted to ask, *What's going on? What were you guys talking about?* But we'd stopped talking

to each other long ago about anything except the basic necessities of life.

I hate you, I'd said.

Grow up. Stop sulking as if I'm the reason he's gone, and stop acting like a baby. I can't take care of both of us right now.

Fine. I don't need you anyway.

My heart burned and pulsed, a sun bereft of its planets.