

Becoming Jinn

Lori Goldstein



Feiweil and Friends
New York

For Marc, for being right.

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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Zar Sisterhoods



Mothers

Nadia

Raina

Kalyssa

Samara

Jada

Isa



Hana

Yasmin

Azra

Laila

Mina

Farrah

Daughters





A CHISEL, A HAMMER, A WRENCH. A SANDER, A DRILL, A POWER SAW. A laser, a heat gun, a flaming torch. Nothing cuts through the bangle. Nothing I conjure even makes a scratch.

I had to try, just to be sure. But the silver bangle encircling my wrist can't be removed. It was smart of my mother to secure it in the middle of the night while I was asleep, unable to protest.

Though my Jinn ancestry means magic has always been inside me, the rules don't allow me to begin drawing upon it until the day I turn sixteen. The day I receive my silver bangle. The day I officially become a genie.

Today.

I slam my newly acquired accessory against my bedroom closet, leaving a rounded indent on the wood door. The pristine, gleaming metal mocks me. For the rest of my life, I'll go where I'm told, perform on command, and do it all without question.

Screw that.

Barefooted, I can't kick the pile of tools without impaling myself. I settle for shoving the saw, but in the blade, a flash of gold

reflects back at me. I've ignored the unusual sensation of hairs tickling my bare shoulders all morning . . . the new *tap, tap, tap* of my nails against the conjured metal . . . the hem of my pajama pants now flirting with my calf. Ignored just in case. Just in case this bangle wasn't here to stay. But even my talent for denial is no match for my curiosity when it's been piqued.

Standing at the bathroom mirror, my breath catches in my throat.

The deepening of my olive skin, the angling of my cheekbones, the lengthening of my torso. I've seen them all before. On my mother, who wears them like she owns them. Unlike me, who wears them like a rented Halloween costume.

I lay a finger on the bangle and push, watching it spin around my wrist. Somehow this thing stimulates my body to reach full maturity. As an inherently attractive species, this tends to make us Jinn . . . well, hot. I'm pretty sure it's less a quid pro quo thing (thankfully, otherwise we Jinn would be the most shallow of species) and more an ancestral one, but then again, I'm not privy to the inner workings of the Afrit, the council that rules over our Jinn world.

I run my tongue along my bright white teeth and give thanks that my birthday falls during the summer. Not that I think the HITs (humans in training, aka teenagers) I go to school with would likely question this new and improved Azra Nadira staring back at me. Guess there are benefits to not being popular. Unlike other newbie Jinn, I certainly won't need to change schools or even incite hushed rumors about plastic surgery. For me, one or two fibs about a to-die-for stylist and an oh-so-talented makeup artist will do.

Laughably out of character, of course, but, again, there are benefits to not being popular.

Inspecting all the ways my body has been altered while my mind was unable to resist, I note a distinct lack of curves remains. Seriously, a little *va-va-voom* here or there (and by “there” I’m talking to you, status quo B cup) was too much to ask?

I upend the basket next to the sink. A pair of nail clippers clanks against the marble counter, landing in between dental floss and a barely used compact of blush. I drum my nails, now as luminous as ten perfectly polished pearls, against the cold stone and brandish the nail clippers like a sword.

I knew this was coming. *Click*. I grew up knowing this was coming. *Click*. But still a part of me believed something would stop it. *Click*. Maybe my mother would finally realize I was serious. *Click*. I’ve been begging her to find a way around me having to become a genie since I was old enough to understand what the word “destiny” meant. *Click*. Maybe the Afrit would decide my well-honed lack of enthusiasm was an insult to the long line of Jinn from which I descend. *Click*. Maybe they’d take one look at me and realize that, for the first time in Jinn history, powers should skip a generation. *Click*.

I turn on the faucet and watch with satisfaction as the tips of the long nails that replaced my short ones overnight swirl around the basin and disappear down the drain.

A lock of my newly long hair falls across my eye. With a puff, I blow it aside and drop the clippers on the counter. Peeking out from under the overturned basket is the pointy end of a pair of scissors.

Running away was never an option. *Snip*. I found that out when I was ten, twelve, and fourteen. *Snip*. My Jinn blood is the equivalent of a permanent tracking device. *Snip*. And now it's not just my mother who can find me anywhere, anytime. *Snip*. The Afrit will be watching. *Snip*. If I refuse to grant wishes, if I screw up, if I expose our Jinn world to humans, I will be extracted from this human life I'm pretending to live. *Snip*. I'll be tossed in a cell deep inside the Afrit's underground lair where they sit, rubbing their hands together and cackling as they toy with us Jinn pawns. *Snip*. It's not a death penalty. *Snip*. As much as it may feel like it is. *Snip*.

A blanket of dark espresso hair surrounds my feet. I've sheared off the three inches that are new since yesterday and then some. The color, which morphed from mouse to mink while I slept, is an exact match for my mother's. That can stay. The sheen helps the choppy bob I've given myself look halfway decent.

They can make me grant wishes, but they can't dictate what I'm going to look like while doing it.

I splash water on my face and feel the length of my eyelashes. The gold flecks of my eyes have consumed the hazel. The new color is an exact match not only for the color of my mother's eyes but for the color of all Jinn's eyes. And I can't have that.

Lucky for me, my learning curve with this conjuring thing has been fast. One crooked wrench, one inoperable lighter, and one unrecognizable reciprocating saw preceded the plethora of tools turning my bedroom into a hardware store. And in all fairness, the mangled saw stems less from my lack of skill and more from my ignorance as to what a reciprocating saw actually looks like.

Just as I did when conjuring each tool, I steady my breathing, tune my ears to the beat of my heart, which pumps my Jinn blood

at a rate closer to that of hummingbirds than humans, and close my eyes. In my mind, I form the perfect image of a pair of transparent contacts tinted dark brown.

An icy tingle snakes through my body. I shiver. My body craves heat. In all the ways I take after my mother—in all the ways I take after all Jinn—an intolerance for cold is the one that bothers me the least.

I concentrate until a bead of sweat forms on my upper lip and the slimy lenses float in a sea of saline in the palm of my hand.

Good-bye gold. Good-bye Jinn.

I plant my face an inch away from the mirror. With my index finger on my top lid and my thumb on my bottom, I create a larger bull's-eye for the brown contact. My first attempt sends the lens down the drain. After conjuring another one, I force myself not to blink. I'm successfully affixing the lens to my eyeball when I notice my fingernails are once again long. And red.

My hair shoots past my chin, flies down my neck, and leaves my collarbone in the dust. Post-bangle, pre-haircut, it barely skimmed my shoulders. It now lands mid-B—*Wait, is that now an A?*—cup boob. The gold of my eyes deepens and shimmers until my irises resemble balls of compacted glitter.

Apparently the Afrit *can* dictate what I look like. I dump the contact lenses in the trash and poke my finger in and out of the intricate carvings etched into the bangle. I wouldn't be surprised if one of these indents housed a tiny spy camera and the Afrit were really just a bunch of pervy Peeping Toms.

I dive into my bed and burrow under the soft down of my comforter, grateful for its instant warmth. Ignoring the sound of the dog barking outside, I drink in the sweet smell of the lilacs in

perpetual bloom in our backyard and catch a faint hint of sea beneath the floral perfume. Our house is close enough that, when the wind blows a certain way, we can smell the ocean. It doesn't happen often, mostly because the windows are usually shut to seal in the warmth and the curtains are usually drawn to seal in, well, us.

I will myself to fall back to sleep. Even if I can't sleep, I can still choose to skip today.

All I have to do is stay in bed. All I have to do is not open my eyes. All I have to do is pretend. Fortunately, being skilled in pretending is another way in which I take after my mother, another way in which I take after all Jinn.

Turning toward the window, I breathe in the lilacs. Along with the fragrance comes the pollen. Along with the pollen comes the coughing. Along with the coughing comes the involuntary opening of my eyes.

Who am I kidding? I can't skip today. I don't have that kind of control. The bangle assures that I never will.

I crawl out of bed and shed my pajamas, dropping them on top of the drill. Of course the black tank top I pull over my head and down my newly elongated torso is too short. As I move, the hem plays a game of peekaboo with my belly button, an unintentional homage to the midriff-baring genies of fairy tales and fantasies.

I rummage through the top drawer of my bathroom vanity until I find an elastic and the pair of bug-eyed sunglasses my mother bought for me last year. I gather my hair into a ponytail and hide my gold eyes behind the tinted shades. It's summer. Well, almost summer. In New England, summer doesn't debut until July. And

only if we're lucky. June is always a tease. Still, with tenth grade in the rearview mirror, I can camouflage my new look this way until school starts again. By then, no one will remember what I used to look like.

As if that's a valid concern. I could walk into calculus tomorrow with rainbow-colored dreadlocks and half the class wouldn't even blink an eye.

Being invisible is a trait I've learned all on my own.



THE SMELL OF CHOCOLATE FILLS MY NOSTRILS AS I HEAD DOWN THE stairs. The bracelet slides easily around my wrist but is in no danger of falling off. It doesn't have to be tight like a handcuff to achieve the same effect.

I linger in the kitchen doorway. My mother gathers her long hair with one hand and secures it into a bun with the other. The silk of her emerald kaftan glides across her body, accentuating her graceful movements and making them appear all the more effortless. She leans over our farmhouse table and pushes back her sleeves.

I wrap my hand around my silver bangle. It is identical to the one around my mother's wrist except for the color. Hers, like that of all retired Jinn, shines a deep gold. The same color as her—now, our—eyes.

“Happy birthday, kiddo.” As she takes in my appearance, she shakes her head. “Nice touch with the sunglasses. Very movie star incognito. But the way you're strangling those pretty new locks is criminal.”

I lower the shades so she can see my eyes rolling. Flipping the end of my ponytail, I say, “How else am I supposed to explain the sudden change in length? I’m not the type of girl to get hair extensions. I don’t want people to *think* I’m the type of girl who would get hair extensions.”

“Because they’ll think you’re vain? Or be jealous?” My mother laughs. “Believe me, they’ve been jealous all along. Yesterday, even I would have sworn you couldn’t look any more beautiful.” She smiles. “But I’d have been wrong.”

Despite or maybe because of what I’ve seen in the mirror, I dismiss her compliment. It’s actually my mother who has the capacity to stun. I’ve spent fifteen, no, sixteen years looking at her, and her beauty still catches me by surprise.

She returns her attention to her pastry bag and with a gentle squeeze pipes the second “a” of my name in gold icing. *Azra*. The letters shimmer atop the chocolate-frosted cake. I know from previous birthdays how sugary the combination is, but nothing’s too sweet for us. Salt, we are sensitive to, but the amount of sugar we eat would incite comas in humans.

She underlines my name with a squiggle of gold. Then she pipes that loaded “16” underneath. The exclamation mark she adds causes me to use my long fingernails to scratch at the skin underneath my bangle.

“So,” my mother says, “just in case your stubbornness kept you under the covers for the better part of the day, I scheduled the party for tonight.”

The groan that escapes my lips is a reflex. She knows I don’t want this party because she knows I don’t want this birthday.

At least the guest list is short. It’s not like I have any friends

from school. Having to hide who we are from humans means our social circle consists solely of fellow Jinn.

My mother wanted to invite all five of the female Jinn who make up her Zar, the lifelong friends she calls her “sisters,” and their daughters, who, once we all reach sixteen, will officially make up mine. But I negotiated her down to just Samara, my mother’s best friend, and her daughter, Laila, whom my mother has been desperate for me to make my best friend since we were born. They’re the closest I have to a family.

My mother then makes me promise to be good, like I’m turning six instead of sixteen.

“I’d appreciate it if you could dial down the attitude for the party,” she says. “Laila hasn’t turned yet. Let her be excited, okay?”

She sinks sixteen candles into the smooth icing, and I promise to try. But I know it’s a promise I won’t be able to keep. The only way I could is if the wish I make when I blow those candles out comes true and this band magically falls off my wrist. But I know better. Birthday candles, eyelashes, shooting stars, that’s not how wishes are granted. Being selected by the Afrit, that’s what makes wishing so.

Even if I don’t get a birthday wish, I should be able to spend the day however I want, wherever I want. Sun, sand, and a book. Maybe mussels for lunch. Considering we live less than ten minutes from a four-mile-long sandy shoreline, that’s a wish even a newbie genie like myself could easily grant.

“If the party isn’t until later,” I say, “we can spend the whole day at the beach, right?”

“We could,” my mother says, “but I think we need to start practicing.”

The perfectly decorated cake leaps from the counter, beelining for my head. My instinct to duck kicks in a second after my instinct to throw my hands in the air. The cake freezes, hovering three feet above the hand-painted Moroccan tile floor.

I walk a circle around it, amazed not that the mass of chocolate is floating but that I'm the one making it float. Unlike the magic I've been doing upstairs in my room, this just happened. It was automatic. Something engaged even before my brain could.

I admit it. Having powers doesn't suck. If only they didn't come with being told when and how to use them.

"Who needs practice?" I say with confidence, despite the quiver in my hands.

Crumbs fly and chocolate icing splatters the dark cherry cabinets as the cake plummets to the floor. The three-second rule doesn't even get a chance to be applied, for the cake reassembles in perfect form in less time than it takes to blink.

My mother smiles and places her hands on her curvy hips. "Practice? Certainly not me."

No, my mother doesn't need practice. She's been doing magic since before I was born. Since the day she turned sixteen, probably even earlier. The rules were different back then.

I wipe the single leftover dollop of brown off the kitchen table. As I suck the icing from my finger, my heart pounds. I have no idea how I summoned the magic that suspended the cake in midair or if I can do it again. I'm as curious as I am terrified to find out.



“NOW, AZRA, NOW!”

At this moment, my mother is the one terrified. With good reason.

Flames from the inferno I ignited lick the shelf above the fireplace, threatening to consume her collection of Russian nesting dolls.

“Concentrate like I showed you!” My mother springs back from the stone hearth as a flickering yellow flame paws at her foot. “Like you did before.” She positions herself behind her favorite pumpkin-colored armchair, more willing to sacrifice it than her hand-beaded slippers. “With the cake.”

“I am,” I grumble, even though I’m not. We’ve been at it all morning. My mother’s aggressive agenda has taken the magic right out of these lessons. Memorizing the periodic table was more fun than this.

Her worried eyes dart toward the mantelpiece, and the rosy-cheeked Russians dance over our heads, landing safely on the couch.

“This isn’t working,” I say, upending the empty bucket in my

hand. I release my grip, and the metal pail falls to the floor with a hollow clank. The drops of water I've managed to conjure are less than the amount of saliva I could summon sans magic. "How about we compromise and I turn the faucet on with my mind?"

An ember hurtles past the hearth and lands on the antique Turkish prayer rug. My mother stamps it out and shakes her head. "Come on, Azra. Dig deeper than your surface instincts. This isn't hard."

"For *you*." The frustration in my voice just slips out.

And an admonishment stabs right back.

A *zap!* ten times stronger than a shock from a shuffle across a wool rug pierces the back of my neck. The source of my electric jolt materializes a second later. Yasmin, one of my Zar "sisters."

Having arrived via Jinn teleportation, she quickly drops the red clay pot she's holding onto the coffee table and shouts, "Lalla Kalyssa, watch out!"

Sable-black hair flying behind her, Yasmin rushes to the fireplace, nudging (more like *shoving*) my mother aside. With less effort than it takes to inhale deeply, Yasmin conjures a wall of water that douses the sizzling fire. The charred logs eke out a final hiss as she dissipates the resulting smoke before it fills the room.

"*Phew!*" she says, tossing her long hair off her shoulder. "Good thing I apped when I did."

This is my first time sensing an apporting Jinn. Turns out, it's less like being licked by a puppy and more like being stung by a wasp.

Or in Yasmin's case, a swarm of wasps.

By mutual unspoken agreement, we haven't seen each other in months. For me, these few seconds are enough to reinforce why.

“I mean,” Yasmin says, thrusting back her shoulders, “someone could have gotten hurt.”

The muscles in my jaw tense, preventing me from returning her condescending smile. Though, since it’s always condescending, I should just call it her smile.

My mother straightens her kaftan. “Thank you, Yasmin. Azra was just about to conjure the water. And if not, well . . .” She twiddles her fingers. “I would have never let her get hurt.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” For once, the patronizing tone is missing from Yasmin’s voice. She blinks her thick eyelashes and lowers her gold eyes. “I didn’t mean to imply you couldn’t have conjured the water, Lalla Kalyssa.”

“Lalla” is a term of endearment and respect often used when speaking to a female Jinn one is very close to, kind of like how humans refer to family friends as “aunt” or “uncle” even though they aren’t related by blood. I almost believe Yasmin’s usage is sincere.

Almost.

“Anyway . . .” Yasmin waves her silver-bangled hand. “My mom wanted me to return your tagine.”

Running a finger along the conical dish, my mother says, “The original this time. Not a conjured replica. Thank her for that.” She floats the red-glazed tagine straight from Marrakesh, which she swears is better than any magic can create, into the kitchen. “And thank you for bringing it, Yasmin. Though I did expect you yesterday. I had planned to start cooking Azra’s special dish this morning.”

Back straight as a rod, Yasmin places a hand on her heart. “My

apologies, Lalla Kalyssa. I forgot you like to spend all day cooking. Like a human.”

She smiles, and I expect to see fangs. She’s always seemed more serpent than genie.

She slithers closer as her almond-shaped eyes scan my body. “At least your bangle didn’t do much to improve—” She covers her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, I mean change your appearance, Azra.” She flips her hair. “We had to move states.”

This bangle may change a lot of things, but it doesn’t change this: Yasmin getting under my skin in less than five minutes. This time though, instead of scratching and walking away, I burrow right back under her perfect complexion.

“Really?” I raise an eyebrow. “I thought it had something to do with a sloppy lottery rigging. Right about the time you started granting wishes . . .”

Yasmin’s flared nostrils are at odds with her syrupy tone. “Having trouble with the H₂O?” She kicks the empty bucket with her foot. “Don’t worry, sweetie. Sometimes the Afrit wait months before assigning wish candidates. Me getting the hang of this in a day was probably a fluke.” She snorts. “Took Farrah weeks.”

Fluke? Sweetie? That’s. It. So what if Yasmin’s been an official Jinn for almost a full year? Older means older. Period. Not wiser. And sure as Jinn not better.

Narrowing my eyes, I glare at my silver bangle. My heels drive into the wood floor as I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on the *thud thud, thud thud* of my heart. The harsh squawk of a blue jay in the front yard. The traces of my mother’s vanilla perfume. The weight of the humidity in the air. Instead of letting it all distract

me, I do as my mother instructed and absorb these elements of nature that surround me, welcoming them, internalizing them, commingling their energy with my own.

The sudden shock of current that shoots through my body ends in my fingertips. Water sloshes over the side of the pail, puddling around my bare feet. And Yasmin's.

"Azra!" Yasmin leaps back. "These are *lea-ther!*"

My mother's fleeting smirk doesn't escape my notice as I shove my trembling fingers into my pockets. Still, I'm a bit surprised to hear her unsubtle sayonara.

"No harm done," she says, drying Yasmin's gold gladiator sandals with a swish of her hand. "There, you're good to go. Thanks again for returning the tagine in time for Azra's birthday."

As if this reminds her, Yasmin tips her head in my direction. "Oh, yes. Happy Birthday, Azra." She squares her shoulders and snaps her heels together. "See you later."

And she's gone. Disappeared. Like a snake down a hole.

The mutual unspoken agreement between my mother and I is not to acknowledge that Yasmin, like her mother, Raina, makes her skin as itchy as mine. Instead, she eases over to me, extracting my fists from my pockets. "Better than picturing a wrench, isn't it?"

She's referring to the way I conjured the tools earlier. Simple visualization is, according to my mother, the equivalent of a cheap parlor trick.

"Inelegant," she says.

"But effective," I say, nodding to the box of tools at the front door, poised for donation.

"Maybe, but we Nadiras are better than that, Azra. That's textbook stuff. If you know how something looks and works, you

can conjure it. The more intimately you know the item, the better you do.”

Hence my perfect hammer but my unidentifiable reciprocating saw.

“But,” she says, “we are not sideshow freaks. Our ability to harness the light and energy of this world allows us to manipulate the environment in ways two-bit charlatans can’t even fathom. We can access laws of nature that humans don’t even know exist. Until you ground all your magic in nature, your skills will be limited.”

My instinct is to dismiss her, but the tingle in my fingertips won’t let me.

She tucks a loose strand of hair back into her impromptu updo. “At least one benefit of Yasmin’s visit is we learned all you needed was a little encouragement.”

“Encouragement, condescension, fine line,” I say.

“Whatever works,” she says with a teasing glint in her eye.

A childhood of watching my mother perform magic made me fear I wouldn’t be any good at it, certainly not as good as her, someone who long ago earned the nickname “model Jinn” from her Zar sisters. But she’s always said that being descended from a long line of Jinn means magic lives inside me. Once I received my bangle, all I’d need to do is access it. Or as she’s been insisting all day, *allow* myself to access it. I hate proving her right.

Fanning her face with her hand, she says, “How about you prove just how encouraged you are by putting out the rest of the fires? I fear I’m on the verge of perspiring.”

I’ve never seen my mother sweat, literally or figuratively. But if she were going to, today would be the day. The house is stifling, even for us.

My magically ignited fires churn in the rest of the house's nine fireplaces. Nine because we live in Massachusetts and hate to be cold. Nine because my mother, though no longer a wish-granting Jinn, still has her magic and can install fireplaces at will.

Though my hands still shake, all I have to do is think of Yasmin's smug face and I'm able to conjure water instantly at the dining room fireplace. I make my way to the second floor, extinguishing all the flames that have transformed our house into a two-thousand-square-foot sauna.

My bedroom being last, the air is thick with heat. I raise the double-paned glass window all the way up before kneeling in front of the fire.

"I'm flying, Henry!"

I jerk upright, dousing myself and the hearth with my conjured water as the sound of the little girl from across the street penetrates my bedroom. I cross the room and pull the curtain aside.

The open back of the Carwyns' small SUV is crammed with beach chairs, towels, one, no, two coolers, and an overflowing bucket of plastic toys. Mr. Carwyn, a bit rounder and grayer than the last time I saw him, shoves a bright green tote bag in between a large umbrella and a thickly folded plaid blanket as his six-year-old daughter, Lisa, soars down the driveway.

Head bent against the wind, arms straight out behind her, Lisa makes airplane noises as she circles the car. A shiver travels up my spine as she yells again to her older brother, "I'm flying, Henry!"

Ducking his head to get a glimpse through the open back, Henry yells, "Jumbo jet or single prop?"

"Jumbo!" Lisa comes in for a landing next to his passenger-side door.

The top of Henry's sandy-brown-haired head pokes out of the car. He leans down, picks Lisa up, and hauls her into the backseat. "I thought you looked like a 747," he says.

A tired-sounding Mrs. Carwyn calls from the front passenger seat, "Ready, Hank?"

Mr. Carwyn's grunt precedes him slamming the cargo door shut. He steps back, his flat palms aimed at the car, ready to shove the door closed again should it fail to latch on account of the family of four's mountain of gear.

Mr. Carwyn's halfway to the driver's seat when the door begins to rise. All four Carwyn heads face forward, away from me.

Should I? Can I?

The "can" overcomes the "should," and I test out my range. *Click.* The latch catches. Henry turns around. My heart catapults to my throat. But there's no way he saw. Heard? Doubtful. Even so, he wouldn't know what he heard.

Henry pushes a rainbow-striped beach chair to the side and cranes his neck to see out the back. He cocks his head and smiles. At me? Can he see me? Just in case, I smile back. We haven't talked in a while. Not that when we do talk we say all that much. But still, some days, he's the only one in school I have more than a "hi," "hey," or "sup?" conversation with.

The thumbs-up he gives his father answers my question as the SUV then backs out of the driveway, headed for a day at the beach. There was a time, long ago, when I would have been strapped into the backseat, Henry on one side of me and Jenny on the other.

Before I release the curtain, I let myself seek out the "A+]" scrawled in the bottom right corner of the garage door. Faded as

it is, I'm probably the only one who knows it's more than a series of black scuff marks.

I know because I wrote it. I'm the "A," and Jenny was the "J."

For the first nine years of my life, Jenny Carwyn was my best friend. Jenny and I were born on the same day but not in the same place. As Mrs. Carwyn gave birth in a sterile hospital room ten miles away, my mother expelled me out into her jettied bathtub, surrounded by her Zar sisters.

Our entries into the world marked one of many differences, but Jenny and I were inseparable from the moment we became mobile. Before I could even talk, Mrs. Carwyn would find me on their doorstep, having somehow escaped my mother's eye long enough to wander across the street.

Jenny, too, would have turned sixteen today.

"I'm flying, Azra! I'm flying!"

I close my eyes and see Jenny's fingers wrapped around the metal chain next to me. Higher and higher, we rode the swings on the set in my backyard, me promising her that just a little more and we'd be able to touch the tulip-shaped cloud in the sky.

"I'm flying, Azra!"

She was. She did. And then all that was next to me was the metal chain.

The day she died was the day I realized magic couldn't fix everything. It was the last day I wanted to become a Jinn. A Jinn like my mother. A Jinn like my grandmother. A Jinn like my great-grandmother. On and on, generation upon generation, we become Jinn. In exchange for granting wishes to humans, we receive powers that allow us to do the impossible. Though there are some things even our magic cannot do.

We cannot bring someone back from the dead.

This I learned the day Jenny fell from the swing in our backyard. The day I begged my mother to use her powers to save my best friend. The day I lost my best friend was the last day I had a best friend.

“Azra,” my mother’s voice floats up the stairs. “How about a break from all this, kiddo?”

A break. From all of this. If only there was one. If only I could find one.

Even though my mother always insisted there was no way out of me fulfilling my destiny, when I was younger I thought maybe she was forcing me into this like other parents force kids to take piano lessons.

I steal a last glance at the “A+J.” Henry, barely a year older than Jenny and me, tried to take her place over the years, but I wouldn’t let him. Couldn’t let him. Though it surely would have been better for both of us if I had. But for the past few years, at least he’s had Lisa, whose resemblance to Jenny both comforts and unnerves me. For the first time, I wonder if Henry feels the same.

At the brick hearth, I steady myself against the mantel, allowing my thumping heart to retreat to its normal rhythm. I lay a finger on the oval pendant hanging from a silver chain around my neck. The cursive *A* engraved on the front stands for the first letter of the name I share with my grandmother on my mother’s side—the necklace’s original owner, whom I’ve never met. Like a security blanket, my *A* has always calmed me. I was so young when my mother first looped the chain around my neck that I don’t remember it.

Leaning over the terra cotta bricks, I wring the water out

of my shirt and clutch my *A* once more before heading back downstairs.

When I enter the living room, my mother points to the bookshelf. “Up there,” she says. “Happy birthday.”

A box wrapped in silver and gold is nestled in among the tchotchkes. Painted tribal masks from Ghana, onyx candleholders from Mexico, baskets of yarn from Ireland, the objects cramming the shelves are a tangible history of my mother’s life. Being Jinn has allowed my mother to see the world. Traveling to even the farthest reaches is only a matter of a blink and a nod for Jinn.

My hand reaches the box without me having to stand on tiptoes even though it’s on the highest shelf—something I couldn’t have done yesterday, but then again, yesterday, unlike today, my mother and I were not yet the exact same height. My tank top rides up, fully exposing my belly button.

“Tell me,” my mother says, waving her hand and drying my damp shirt, “because, knowing you, it could go either way. Is the midriff baring an unfortunate side effect of your metamorphosis or an intentional display of contempt for this whole thing?”

I run the tip of my red nail along my exposed stomach, working to bury the ache that always comes with thinking of Jenny. I issue a wry smile that lets her think it’s the latter. I wish I would have thought of that. *I wish*. Rolls off the tongue. So easy to say. Takes so much to do.

Inside the box lies a deep purple tunic with pinstripes of gold so thin the effect is subtle, not flashy. I rub the soft linen between my fingers. “It’s . . . it’s beautiful. Thanks, Mom. Really.”

My sincerity throws her. “I can make it black if you want.”

“No, I like the purple.” The understated nature of the shirt—a

departure from the bright fabrics of her wardrobe but in line with my monotone collection of blacks, whites, and grays—proves she knows how hard all this is for me. As does what comes next.

“I know I said we’d wait until tomorrow,” she says, refolding the shirt. “But if you want, if you’re not too tired, we can give it a try.”

“It” can only mean one thing—the power even I couldn’t help but crave.

“Ready to app, kiddo?”



THE RIDES I'VE HITCHED WHILE MY MOTHER APPORTED US BOTH ARE nothing like doing it myself.

I do as she says and stand as still as stone. I'm so attuned to the beating of my heart that it pounds in my ears as if playing through earbuds. I close my eyes and picture the space around me in such detail that I could paint it if I had any artistic talent, which I don't. I envision my destination, focusing on one item I know to be in that location, clearly drawing it in my mind. Eventually, my mother says I won't need a specific object to latch onto. The name of the place itself will be enough, which is how we accomplish long-distance apping to grant wishes around the world in locales we've never been.

My mind zeroes in on my old single-speed bike.

Then it's pulse racing, head spinning, adrenaline skyrocketing. *Rush, rush, rush.*

Unlike the chill that accompanies conjuring, apping sears my insides as if they were made of fire. Light-headed, I plant my hand on the wall of the garage.

I'm in the garage. I *apped* myself to the garage.

What's that sound? That big ole creak? The door to the world just opened, and I'm standing on the welcome mat.

It may only be the garage, but it's a start.

As I app back into the living room, I work to erase the grin that's plastered itself to my face. I convince my mother to conjure us a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream, and I produce the two spoons.

We're halfway through the container when my skin prickles and a purring fills my ears. It's less a shock and more like the vibration from a pumped-up stereo bass.

The next instant, Hana apport into our living room. Her orange-red hair echoes the fierce flames of my earlier fires, but she's the gentlest of my soon-to-be Zar sisters, except for Laila, of course.

"Happy Birthday!" Hana gushes, with her arms flung wide.

Is it my own arms at my sides that makes her change course? Because instead of hugging me, she pulls her elbows in and takes my hand, giving my arm a shy, tentative tug.

Am I Hana's Yasmin?

As she greets my mother with a kiss, I can't help but think magic lessons aren't the ones I need.

Though we've e-mailed a few times, I haven't seen her since she became Hana 2.0. Body taller, hair redder, lips fuller. What I'm thinking about her, she says about me.

"You're gorg, Azra!"

Except I wouldn't use "gorg" without the "eous." Ever.

She walks a circle around me. "Hmm . . . though it's all actually pretty subtle, isn't it? Thankfully for the rest of us."

My mother and Hana laugh. Unsure if I should join, I issue an awkward half smile. Which results in . . . crickets.

Hana clears her throat. “Just wanted to swing by and give you this.”

She holds out a kitschy, tarnished-gold, Aladdin-style lamp, complete with the stereotypical long spout and curved handle. “Congrats! You’re the new keeper.”

Pop culture has turned genies into a joke. Oil lamps, serving a master, flying carpets, three wishes—none of it’s true. Jinn live in houses, not lamps or bottles. Jinn do not fly on a carpet or otherwise. The Afrit assign wish candidates to Jinn. The candidate gets but one wish. The idea of three stems from humans who were greedy and Jinn who were pushovers.

“Keeper?” I ask.

Hana purses her lips. “Oh, right, you haven’t been to most of our parties, have you?”

I skipped Yasmin’s sixteenth birthday bash. Our other Zar sister, Mina’s, too. But what about Farrah’s and Hana’s parties? I don’t recall getting an invite to their birthdays.

Hana and I stare at each other as we each realize this at the same time.

Again, crickets.

“Yasmin started it,” Hana says. “She found Mr. Gemp—”

“Gemp?”

“Genie lamp.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, Yasmin passed it to Mina when she turned sixteen. And Mina gave it to Farrah, who gave it to me, and now, well, now it’s your turn.” She pulls the lamp, still held in her outstretched hands, closer to her chest. “You don’t have to take it if you don’t want to. I know it’s silly. It’s just—”

“No.” I pluck the lamp with more force than I intended. I’m really going to scare the poor Jinn. “I might have a wish or two I’d like granted,” I say softly as I stroke the side of the lamp.

Hana and my mother laugh again. This time, I join in, even though, in my heart, that wasn’t a joke.

There’s talk of how Hana’s finals went (straight As, as usual) and the summer internship in the costumes department of her local theater she nabbed (with her mother’s magical help, of course), and I zone out. Second to Laila, Hana’s the one I’m closest to. But closest to and close aren’t the same thing.

We just don’t have much in common.

“Get your family’s cantamen yet?” Hana asks.

Other than this.

“I made these killer flash cards for mine.”

Why am I not surprised? Then again, considering the size of my family’s genie handbook, that might not be such a bad idea. The Nadira cantamen codex is so big, if I dropped it, I’d surely shatter a toe. Or Yasmin’s.

I grin slightly at the thought.

Hana mistakes my look for excitement. “I can help you if you want.”

“That’d be lovely, Hana.”

Though the words left my mother’s lips, not mine, when Hana hugs me good-bye, she whispers, “I told the others you’d come around.” She releases me, waves to my mother, and says, “See you later!” before apportioning.

That makes two “see you later’s.” From my soon-to-be Zar sisters. On my birthday.

And it clicks. “You didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” It’s too late for my mother’s innocent eyes. Hiding this is the reason—well, part of the reason—she was so quick to shoo Yasmin out the door.

“Seriously? You invited all those GITs to my party?”

My mother gives me a blank look.

“GITs,” I say. “Genies in training, HITs are tricky enough. But teenagers with powers?” I shudder.

I was trying to be funny more than bratty. My mother’s, “Don’t start, Azra,” as she leaves me for the kitchen means my ratio was off.

Through the open doorway, I watch her place the red tagine on the stovetop. Like always, my mouth waters.

Her chicken tagine with tomatoes and sweet caramelized onions has been my favorite for as long as I can remember. It’s one of the few meals she insists on making without the assistance of magic. “Some things turn out better without magic,” she once told me when I was little. “Making something with your hands instead of your mind can be satisfying, even rewarding,” she said as I stood on a chair watching her slice the juicy, red tomatoes grown, more or less naturally, in our backyard.

Using my powers of levitation, I steal an orange cherry tomato, a new variety for us this year, from the bowl on the counter as she grinds the cinnamon with a wave of her hand.

Okay, so she uses a little magic.

Before popping the tomato in my mouth, I say, “You should have asked.”

She sighs. “I did. You said no.”

“And so you invited them all anyway?”

My mother shakes the excess water from a freshly washed bundle of cilantro and ignores me. Again.

Testing my levitation skill with something heavier, I float Mr. Gemp her way. “This will be their fifth.”

“Hmm?” She swats at Mr. Gemp.

“Birthday party. Their fifth. Guess I should consider myself lucky I only have to make it through this one.”

The unexpected crack in my voice makes me lose control of the lantern. My mother’s eyes meet mine as she catches it and sets it on the table.

She begins methodically stripping cilantro leaves from their stems. “My Zar should have never let this go on for as long as we did.” She pauses. “I shouldn’t have.”

Leaning against the side of the refrigerator, I think of all the parties I missed. Theirs and mine. I haven’t had a birthday party with my full Zar since the year after Jenny died.

“Then again,” she says, “I haven’t been able to force you to do anything in years.”

As I wiggle my wrist, the bangle bounces against my skin. *Except for this.*

She gathers the cilantro leaves into a neat pile. “I thought it’d be better if you came around on your own. All of you. But Laila will be sixteen soon, and your Zar will become official. You girls need to cement your bond now. Besides, there’s a lot you can learn from them.”

I turn the oven on from across the room. “I’ve got this.”

“I wasn’t referring to magic,” she says curtly. “But fine, if you’re already an expert on what you can do, what about the things you can’t do? Crystal clear on those, I assume?”

Having grown up in a house where meals cook themselves, high heels pop out of nowhere, and walls swap paint colors in an instant, the list of things we *can't* do is short.

"I can't grant a wish for a human not assigned to me by the Afrit." I repeat what I learned practically at birth.

From here, I have a perfect view of the Carwyns' garage out our living room window.

"I can't heal humans." A lump finds its way to my throat. "And I can't bring someone back from the dead." I repeat what I learned when I was nine.

My mother's face falls, but I keep going. "We live here. *Alone*. While—"

In an instant, she's at my side. The scent of cilantro clinging to her combined with the way she strokes my back causes the lump in my throat to swell. I fight back the water my tear ducts are conjuring without my permission.

"I get it, Azra," she says gently. "The Afrit's rules stink. But you can dislike what you have to do without disliking who you are. And who they are. Your sisters. It's precisely the restrictions the Afrit have placed on us that make your Zar sisters that much more important. They fill the hole."

My face grows hot, and my teeth clench. The hole? Try holes, plural. Like the hole left when I had to stop befriending humans because my lies about the nine fireplaces and perpetually blooming backyard lilacs were no longer cutting it. Like the hole left by the Jinn father I've never met. Like the hole left by Jenny.

My mother's Zar sisters may be enough for her, but the Jinn girls who will make up my Zar have a heck of a crater to fill.

My mother squeezes my shoulder. "You need them, kiddo.

Learning to access your magic is only part of granting wishes. There's a lot more to becoming Jinn."

Swallowing the fight rising up in my throat, I force myself to say the one thing I've wanted to say since I woke up this morning. "And I . . . I have to, right?"

Though she manages a weak smile, the creases around my mother's eyes show her exhaustion. Whether she's tired or just tired of me is unclear.

"Look, Azra, here's the thing. This may not be the life you want, but it's the only one you've got. Making the best of it, not the worst, is up to you, but it's a long road to take all by yourself. Life is compromise, after all."

Compromise? Really? That's what becoming Jinn is?

My knuckles turn white as I ball my hands into fists. Without a word, I peel out of the kitchen and march toward the stairs. Until the bangle taps against my leg, I forget I don't need the stairs anymore.

I app myself to my room, relishing the internal burn as I collapse on top of my white comforter. I flick the bangle with one finger, letting it ride circles around my wrist.

Compromise suggests a concession on each side. But we're the ones who have to give up everything. We live without the rest of our families, in our little Zar enclaves, churning out the next generation of Jinn. Being able to conjure chocolate truffles doesn't make up for that.

My mother doesn't understand. She can't understand. Yes, the same restrictions apply for her, but that wasn't always the case. She grew up with her mother and her father. She had male Jinn in her life, even . . . even my father. It wasn't until around the time I was

born that the Afrit ordered all male Jinn to leave the human world. Even if she only had my father for a short time, it's more than I've had.

I bury my head under my pillow until the smell of browning chicken wafts through my open door. I sit up. My mother's cooking without magic for me. *She's trying.* My birthday present, the purple shirt neatly folded on my dresser, further chastens me. I *know* she's trying.

And the truth is, unless we want to bring the wrath of the Afrit down on us, neither one of us has a choice. On this long road, all we really have is each other.

Mr. Gemp materializes out of thin air on my nightstand.

I swear, sometimes it's as if my mother can read my mind. Because we don't just have each other. We also have our Zar sisters. At least we're supposed to.

Open. Close. Open. Close.

I toggle the lid, but nothing escapes in a cloud of blue smoke. I pick up the lamp to move it to my bookshelf and notice the top isn't fully closed. Something's caught in the hinge. Not a magical genie—at least not yet.

Rolled up inside the lantern is a photograph of six tween Jinn. Along with our shiny hair and penchant for sugar, we inherited our closest Zar relationships from our mothers: me and Laila; Mina and Farrah; Hana and Yasmin. I always thought Hana got the raw end of that deal. Which everyone else must think of Laila.

Laila, sweet, blond, petite Laila, who, even in the picture, is a head shorter than the rest of us. Standing in front with her skinny arms spread wide, the tip of one finger in front of me and the tip of the other in front of Yasmin. The mortar in our bricks then and now.

My mousy self-cropped hair and slouch is countered by Yasmin's cascading jet-black curls and arched back. With her long skinny nose raised in the air, all that's missing is the pointy black hat. Again, then and now.

Hana. Next to me, with her fiery-red hair grazing her shoulders and mine. She was in her eyeglasses-wearing stage then. As if she needed them to prove how smart she is.

And in the middle, Mina and Farrah, as close as Siamese twins. Born with a noisemaker in her mouth and party streamers around her belly, baby-faced Mina stands in her signature stance of hands tossed high in the air. With her boundless energy and vivacious personality, she'd match, hoop for hoop, any dolphin at SeaWorld. Next to her is square-chinned Farrah, whose quick, sharp movements and cuddly nature always reminded me of a rabbit. Her foot's caught in mid-tap and her finger tugs on a strand of hair as she works to cover what she's always thought was a slightly too-big forehead.

Laila, Yasmin, Hana, Mina, and Farrah. My Zar, who stopped inviting me to their birthday parties. But who, apparently, are still coming to mine.

I wonder if they feel as conflicted about that as I do?

Even before I flip the photo over, I know the date it was taken. The day I turned ten. The first birthday I didn't share with Jenny.

I remember the present Laila gave me: a framed picture of Jenny and me kneeling on the grass outside her house with the tiny Laila standing on our backs. Henry took that photo.

I remember the awkward looks on Hana, Mina, and Farrah's faces as Laila gave me that present. None of them acknowledged Jenny's absence then. None of them had acknowledged Jenny's

absence in the year before then. Though Jenny had been as much a fixture in my life as they'd been, when she was gone, it was like she never existed.

But mostly, I remember Yasmin. Walking in on her reading my diary later that day. Seeing the guilt turn to hurt on Hana's freckled face. Watching Mina mistakenly snip Farrah's dark brown bangs too short. Feeling Laila's warm fingers interlacing with mine, holding me back as much as holding me.

"None of them!" Yasmin read, stomping her foot and treating my words like those of a petulant child instead of a grief-stricken "sister."

Not Hana, not Mina, not Farrah, not Yasmin. None of them came. None of them said they were sorry. Not right away and not in the months since. She was my best friend. I thought she was their friend too. They acted like it. Are they acting with me too?

Laila's the only one who cares. She's the only one I need. I'd trade all the rest to have Jenny back. I'd trade all the rest to have Jenny back for a single day. Let the Afrit take them. They deserve that and more.

Even Yasmin's voice trembled as she read that last line.

Each one tried to apologize. The heart-shaped pillow embroidered with my and Jenny's initials that Hana made me still sits on the chair next to my window, though Mina's collage of all the guys from *One Tree Hill* has probably been recycled into toilet paper or coffee filters by now. The mix CD Farrah gave me, bursting with the falsetto of all her favorite boy bands, is tucked away somewhere on my shelves. Yasmin's card? The one where she listed all the reasons not to befriend humans? I read it and burned it.

Maybe in her own way she was trying. They all were. But I couldn't. My tenth birthday is one of a handful of times my whole Zar has been together in the years since. The more our mothers pushed, the more we pulled away.

Sometimes, Laila and I were a team. When Yasmin pulled a new prank on a human, we tattled together. But when Hana staged one of her runway shows, making each of us model ensembles she put together from clothes conjured by her mother, I hit the pavement alone while Laila hopped right up on the lighted catwalk our mothers' powers built. Mina and Farrah morphed from infatuated preteens to full-blown boy-crazy Jinn, sneaking into clubs to see emo bands that I mistakenly thought had something to do with an annoying character on *Sesame Street*.

By the time I was ready to forgive, they were past wanting me to.

But maybe the genie lamp my mother just sent up here shows they're ready to try. Which leaves me as the only one not.

As usual.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm pulling my favorite pair of jeans out of my closet. Though they weren't when I bought them, they are now low-rise. Ultra low-rise. And cropped. The hem falls mid-calf.

The sudden commotion from downstairs means someone's already here.

Unfolding the tunic as I dart across the hall, I slip it over my head and rifle through the hangers in my mother's closet. The pair of white linen pants I find toward the back fits perfectly.

In my bathroom, I braid my long hair and even dab on some blush and lip gloss. Purple lip gloss. I make it match the color of

the shirt from my mother. Groomed and dressed like this, I have to admit my magical makeover isn't half bad.

I'm almost out the door when I turn back around. My mother's right. This *is* a long road. Maybe I *can* dislike what I have to do without disliking who I am. And who my Zar sisters are (Yasmin being the obvious exception).

Using my powers, I center Mr. Gemp on my nightstand and fling the cantamen my mother brought up earlier to the floor, parking it under my bed. Amid the dustballs, the ratty old thing should be right at home.

Life is compromise, after all.



LAILA'S EYES THREATEN TO POP OUT OF THEIR SOCKETS AS I ENTER the living room. Samara, her mother, smothers me in an embrace. As usual, her golden hair smells like apricots. Now taller than she is, I nuzzle into the soft waves and let her hold me. I've known Samara my entire life. Before I found out she too was a Jinn, there were times when I wanted her to be my mother. That I still do on occasion is a source of continuous guilt.

"My little Azra," Samara says, releasing me. "You are breathtaking. Not that you weren't always gorgeous. But now . . . let's just say you might break your mom's record for most invites to prom." She calls out to my mother. "What do you think, Kalyssa? Will you be upset if your daughter outshines you?"

"Lalla Sam, stop it." I sink into the couch. "There's no danger of that."

My mother joins us in the living room, a tray with bowls of hummus, roasted eggplant, and pita bread following her.

My newly inspired resolve to give this a chance receives its first

positive reinforcement when my mother, upon seeing me in the purple tunic, smiles warmly.

Laila still hasn't said a word. I feel her eyes on me and turn to her. "What?" I instantly regret the harshness of my tone.

Weakest. Resolve. Ever.

That we aren't the best friends our mothers want us to be is entirely my fault. Still, we've grown up together, and she's the closest I'll ever come to having a sibling. When we were little, I liked having Laila around. Especially after Jenny was gone, being with Laila made me feel like I wasn't alone.

"It's just . . ." Laila starts. "This is what I'm going to look like?"

But ever since we started needing bras and deodorant, I've been alone again. Because Laila can't wait to be a genie.

"Awesome." She runs her fingers through her already long hair. "Only a few more weeks to go."

Seeing what magic managed to do to me, I'm not sure I want to stand next to Laila, with her blond curls and pale blue eyes, after she turns sixteen, especially if Samara's voluptuous figure is any indication of what's to come. As Samara bends over the coffee table to dip a slice of warm pita into the hummus, I get an eyeful of Laila's future.

I used to think the Afrit were huge fans of that silly old TV show and decided humans deserved their genies sexed up: lipstick-wearing, midriff-baring, cleavage-daring.

But the attractiveness of our species is simply genetic. We are all descended from Lalla Mimouna and Sidi Mimoun, the first Jinn power couple. Legend has it that Jinn were once spirit creatures, made of smokeless fire. These spirits inhabited a plane

between the air and the earth and embodied the purest elements of the natural world. In return for corporeal form, the spirits agreed to use the magical powers nature bestowed on them to serve humans for the “greater good.”

Guess “pure” translated into “hot” when those spirits got legs. Then again, Jinn are particularly clever. It wouldn’t surprise me if the bargain with nature included an eye-candy clause and we Jinn actually are the most shallow of species.

Samara wipes a glob of hummus off her heaving bosom, which causes Laila to turn to me. “Did you need a bigger bra?”

Everyone’s eyes fall on my chest, which I am too easily able to cover with my arms.

“I sure hope I do.” Laila pulls out the collar of her cotton short-sleeved sweater and studies her breasts.

Samara’s deep, sexy laugh precedes her reply. “Oh, you will. Runs in our line. Always has.”

Laila pats her boobs and beams.

Though our birthdays are less than two months apart, Laila has always seemed younger. Her being short—and anything under five feet four inches is short for a Jinn—doesn’t help that. That’ll likely change when she gets her bangle. But she’s also seemed younger because she’s so eager. She’s been excited for her sixteenth birthday as far back as I can remember.

One December, when we were ten, we were celebrating Christmas. We celebrate all the religious holidays on a rotating basis. Some years it’s Christmas, some years it’s Hanukkah, some years it’s Kwanzaa, some years it’s Las Posadas (my favorite because it involves whacking piñatas), and so on. But that year, it was Christmas’s turn. Our moms were huddled together in front of the fire

having one of their marathon talks, and Laila and I were rearranging the decorations on the tree.

Laila tore off a piece of the silver tinsel and broke it in half. She tied one strand around my wrist and the other around her own. "There," she said, "now you grant my wish, and I'll grant yours."

She wanted me to pretend first. Not because she wanted to make a wish so badly but because she wanted me to get the chance to grant one first. She was being her usual kind, generous self, letting me be the first to role-play as a genie. To Laila, being able to grant a wish was far more of a thrill than being able to make one.

Six years later, this fact still separates us. The only thing that's changed is my need to pretend. Now I can actually grant wishes. Somehow, everything I've done today makes this prospect more, not less, frightening.

"Dinner should be ready by the time everyone else gets here," my mother says.

Samara snorts. "Oh, Kalyssa, you and your tagines. Tell me, why tagines? Why are tagines the only dish you make the human way? The very, very slow way?"

My mother looks at me. "I just think it tastes better that way."

Her concession to make my favorite meal without using Jinn magic is the closest my mother can come to granting what she knows has always been my wish.

Samara swishes the wrist of her gold-bangled hand. "Yes, because it makes you starving. Hunger makes everything taste better. If I had your talents, there's nothing I wouldn't conjure rather than cook."

“Well,” Laila says, drawing out the word, “perhaps if you spent half as much time practicing conjuring food as you do purses, we’d end up with something edible.”

Samara flutters her thick eyelashes at her daughter. “I’ll let you perfect conjuring food, sweetheart. Until then, we’ll have to settle for raiding the kitchen for more snacks.”

Laila hops off the couch and grabs my hand. “Want to help?”

Maybe maintaining my resolve is getting easier, because I kinda do. Let’s say it’s that and not the fact that my stomach is rumbling, begging for more than just the mint chocolate chip ice cream I fed it today.

“Sure, in a minute,” I say, which elicits an approving nod from my mother. She follows Laila and Samara into the kitchen while I roll up the sleeves of my tunic.

The house still radiates warmth from the morning’s fires. I kneel on the couch and lift the window behind it as the Carwyns’ SUV pulls into their driveway. Lisa pops out first, a pink-and-white-striped beach towel tied around her neck like a cape. Mr. and Mrs. Carwyn exit the front seats. Henry is the last to appear.

He waits until his sister has completed her circuit of figure eights across the front lawn and unties the towel. He shakes it, folds it in half, and adds it to the bag his father unloads from the back of the car.

It’s a normal Saturday in the Carwyn household.

Mrs. Carwyn carries a red-and-white-checked doggie bag. The styling is instantly recognizable as that of the seafood shack that makes the best fried clams and oysters in our coastal town. The Carwyns must have spent the day at the beach followed by dinner at the Pearl. They spent my birthday the way I wanted to.

Before the family enters the house, each member leaves a pair of sandy flip-flops by the hose on the side of the garage. The four pairs sit there, each representing its owner: mother, father, daughter, son. When my family returns home from the beach, there are only two pairs of flip-flops. And they aren't even sandy. My mother vanishes the sand before we get in the car.

I'm still staring at their house when Henry emerges from the garage. He turns on the faucet and uses the hose to wash out a bucket shaped like a sandcastle. The patches of sun-bleached white on the blue plastic make me certain it's the same one Jenny and I used to play with.

Henry leans over to pick up a pair of flip-flops and his glasses slide off his nose. He digs them out of the slightly too-tall grass and tucks them into his back pocket. The post-beach, sun-touched pink of his cheeks and windblown tousle of his light brown hair suit him better than the fluorescent lights and prison gray walls of our French classroom. He looks directly at me. I freeze. The day at the beach and dinner at the Pearl was surely his family's way of trying to forget what today would have been for Jenny.

I flop down and hide behind the couch cushions. I can't think about that on top of everything else. When my rapid heartbeat slows, I inch back up and peer over the pillows. Henry is turning off the spigot. He wipes his glasses with the end of his shirt before he returns them to their perch on the bridge of his nose. He wasn't wearing his glasses. He couldn't have seen me. I sit back up. He looks right at me. And waves.

Though I'm technically an adult, at least in the Jinn world, my childish response is to duck behind the cushions again.

"Azra!" My mom enters the room with a bowl so full of chips

that she needs to levitate the top ones to prevent them from cascading over the side. “It’s freezing. What are you doing with that window open?”

Henry’s still standing there when I shut the window. I turn around to see a bottle of wine hovering above the coffee table.

“Care for a glass?” Samara says.

Four wineglasses swoop into the room, landing underneath the bottle of wine just as the cork shoots out of the neck. The red liquid flows in an arc into the suspended stemware.

I grab a curtain in each hand and draw the fabric over the front windows.

It’s a normal Saturday in the Nadira household.