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What is Mine

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What is Mine

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of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

Hanaa R. Hamad

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I would like to thank first, my father, who has fostered me throughout my education. Without his encouragement, I would not have come this far.

To Mama, for always being proud of me.

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For Baba, Sido and Ghanem
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Leaving Nablus was something she had wanted dangerously. She wanted to be freed from it. The people. Their ways. But she never thought her exit would be as it was. Who knew a dream could be realized through a nightmare? Before that moment, she had imagined she would travel happily out of there in a taxi with Kareem at her side.

Her name is Ameena Yunis, and she speaks now after her silence. She wants to show you what she has witnessed, what she has learned, and what may have been hidden from you. Perhaps then, you will understand her better. Should you choose not to believe her, that is your right. After all, many histories are hardly true…

Chapter 1:
The Night of the Wedding:

It is 1987, an April night in Nablus. The air is chilly and there is a cold mist along the courtyard. Droplets of dew have begun to fall upon the trees and the sparse hills as she waits nervously in the comfort of her salmon brick home for the sheikh to arrive. It is the same tall, rectangular home she played outside of as a child, the home where her mother treated her childhood scratches, and the home she will be leaving now at the age of seventeen. It has many windows and is two stories high. Behind it, are acres of blooming vegetation, thriving out of the red earth and desert lands. How could something
so dry, so dead, produce such life? Still, she does not know. She thinks of her childhood
here and tears well in her eyes. Though she will only be moving a few houses down
where Kareem and her brother in laws have built them a home, she knows things will be
different from then on. She will not be sharing a home with her siblings anymore. But her
tears seem to be helping. Yes, they are soothing.

She has much to be proud of. She is young and a bride. She is doing what is
expected of a young woman in the wide acres of what is Nablus, the side of the city that
is plowed and catered to. She is marrying, Kareem Jalal Yunis, her childhood neighbor. It
is the fifth day of the month. She watches the guests arrive in the silence of her bedroom.
Inside she stirs of excitement. It is customary for the bride to stay hidden until after all of
the guests are present. They will see her as she steps down the stairs, glowing in her
white gown.

It is a breezy spring night. A cool rush of fresh air whispers past her, bringing her
the scent of lemons and orange blossoms, the kind that she is accustomed to. It is the
most soothing coolness she has ever known. The moon shines in between the pine trees.
There is nothing she can do but stare out the window that she sits across from and wait
for them to call her down. Mama told her not to move, or else she might ruin her hair and
makeup. She actually listened to her this time. Being beautiful tonight is all that matters.
She feels both anxious and bored, and does nothing but stare at the moon because it has
attracted her attention. She is happy to be marrying Kareem.

When the sheikh arrives, he will be writing her marriage contract to Kareem.
There will be a party, a place for the men to celebrate and a place for the women. The
women will sing to the drumming of the *tabla*, and there will be *debca*. She peers outside of her window where her father and her soon to be father in law, *Ammy Jalal*, stand with Kareem. She cannot help watching him. He is more handsome than any man she has seen—his stubbly beard edging around his strong jaw. His pursed lips. His bright blue eyes under his dark brows. His thick black hair. She likes that he is twenty years old. It is attractive and makes him seem mature. She thinks of him as an adult that can show her the way to adulthood, but still amusing all the while. She studies his face as he talks with her father. He looks content and nervous at the same time. She knows he is content. He showed her when he took her hand on the day of her fifteenth birthday and told her that she was his favorite person. He showed her when he said he had eyes for no other. She cannot find in all her will the strength to take her eyes off him.

His father is a farmer like hers. They have acres of land just outside of their homes. After they marry, Kareem is to continue working on those plots just as he has done growing up. She hopes not for long. He promised they would move away as soon as they could. They would go to Jordan first, and then they would apply to become citizens of the United States. She feels satisfied and grateful that she will be leaving soon.

She takes one last look out the window. She feels joy. Then she turns to the mirror to check her reflection. She wants to look beautiful for Kareem. She wears a white dress, made of lace and tool that flows down to the floor. It has long sleeves and a big skirt. She is slender, lean, but still curved. She hopes that she will look beautiful. She looks into her own deep set hazel eyes, her *kholi* perfectly adorned. She wears a fluffy white veil over her long flowing chocolate brown locks. And on her lips, cherry red lipstick. This is how
a bride should look. She hopes Kareem will be satisfied with her. She believes they are a fair match and she is pleased. She believes Kareem will think so as well.

Mama comes up the stairs to summon her down. She is a petite woman with a petite voice. Already, she is fretting, as she usually does on occasions that involve visitors.

“Yubbuyae! Everyone is going to arrive and the hilew has not finished baking yet! Are you ready? Sheikh Abu Hassan is almost here!” She loves her Mama dearly, even though she disagrees with her often. She is proud of having such a joyous, kind mother.

“Yes, yumma,” she says.

She does not feel irritated by Mama’s fretting tonight, nor does she care to fight her about it. Mama disappears quickly and will be back when it is time for her to come down. She knows the women are sitting in the family room, waiting for her appearance. She imagines them whispering to each other about her beauty. This is something that excites her.

Kareem waits in the living room among the men. He will see her as she steps down the stairs that arch into the spacious hall. He sits among his male relatives, brothers, uncles, cousins, and grandfathers. They wear coats and ties, some of them with checkered keffiyehs on the tops of their heads. The rooms are lit, and the deep red upholstery is stunning to the eye.

Mama reappears. The sheikh has arrived. It is time.

“Yalla,” Mama says, and Ameena follows her.
Heads turn when she steps down cautiously in her heels. They whisper and stare as her loose waves fall down her back and hang from her veil. She feels her own beauty. On this night, she feels that none of the girls in her town can match it.

“As-salaamu alaykum.” she says to them. She does not always salem to guests, but she is happy to this evening.

“Wa alaykum as-salaam,” they say. They smile with clear admiration.

Her brother Hesham and her sister Jenan gather at the end of the stairs to watch. They look up at her and giggle to themselves. Jenan smiles at her. Ameena arrives at the end of the stairs and takes her seat next to Kareem in the family room where the men sit. The women rise and gather around them. Abu Hassan, the sheikh, stands up and begins the katb kitab ceremony.

“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful…” he says. He clears his throat. “The chapter Al Nahl, in the Quran states: ‘And Allah has made for you from yourselves mates and has made for you from your mates sons and grandchildren and has provided for you from the good things,” he recites eloquently. Then he turns his head to Kareem and addresses him.

“Marriage is an obligation that is very beneficial to all believers. It can provide companionship as well as compassion.” He folds his hands to his front. “The Prophet, May Allah’s Peace and Blessings be upon him, treated his wives honorably and respectfully. Keep this in mind as you enter your marriage. Take care of your wife, and she shall take care of you.” He pulls the marriage contract out of the envelope and smoothes it over the table. “And remember that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said:
the most perfect believer in faith is the one whose character is finest and who is kindest to his wife.” He continues his speech, but she cannot focus on all that he says. She is in a state of elevation. She thinks of the freedom she will have now that is married. She is excited about the time she will spend living with Kareem.

Now he addresses her father and Kareem’s father, asking each of them separately to repeat after him the agreements of the contract of their marriage. Baba repeats the sheikh’s words effortlessly, since he is already knowledgeable about what is said at the katib kitab. He often boasts his intelligence by expressing his knowledge in conversation. She and her siblings joked often that Baba always acts as if his judgment and knowledge is always superior to the judgment and knowledge of whomever he is conversing with. He always had to have the upper say. Ameena is sure that he has a photographic memory, because he hardly ever forgets anything, especially anytime someone has offended him. She has known since childhood that the success of their family had been by his doing, his hard work and aggressive nature. It seems he is always conscious of this.

The recitation is complete. The sheikh rises and turns to her.

“Alf mabrook,” he says.

“Allay baarek feek,” she says.

“Do you consent to this marriage?”

“Yes.”

“Alhamdulilah. Do you have any requests that you would like to make?” he asks her.
“Yes,” she says. She can feel the shock in everyone. This is the part where the bride usually says no. The sheikh waits for her to continue.

“I would like to request that Kareem take no other wives.”

The expression on Abu Hassan’s face turns to surprise. He appears concerned. A collective mutter echoes throughout the room. Mama’s smile vanishes and her expression turns to one of suppressed fury. Baba frowns, closes his eyes and shakes his head. She expects them to scold her when the wedding is over. But she has no reason to be ashamed of her request. The Quran specifically advises men to take only one wife, since it is almost impossible to give numerous wives equal attention and support.

“I don’t think it would be best for you to make the request. Should you be unable to bear children, he may be forced to divorce you,” the sheikh says. He looks sternly into her eyes.

“I’m aware of that,” she says. She raises her chin. She knows the sheikh is speaking on behalf of the people, on behalf of Nablus, and on behalf of Falasteen herself. But she has seen many wives suffer after their husbands have taken other wives, and she has sworn not to allow such things to happen to her.

“If you make this request, you are raising the likelihood of a divorce. You shouldn’t take divorce so lightly, ya Ameena. You do not know what may happen in the future.”

“I will give him children,” she says. “He will have no reason to divorce me.”

There is a discomfort all throughout the room, and then Kareem laughs aloud. His face looks clearly amused, as it always did when she did something outrageous. She
thinks he is marrying her precisely because she amuses him. There is more muttering from their relatives, while others join in Kareem’s laughter. She does not know if they are laughing at her request, or laughing at Kareem’s laughter.

“Do you agree to these terms?” the sheikh asks Kareem. He does not react to the laughter.

“Yes,” Kareem says. He is still smiling. Abu Hassan raises his eyebrows, then nods.

The men continue muttering.

“Now, will the witnesses please sign?” Abu Hassan says. Their uncles sign the contract, and all the men begin shaking hands. Her grandfather sits smiling as he watches from his chair, despite the discomfort she created with her unusual request. She had hoped for his approval of her marriage to Kareem, and it gives her deep joy to see him smiling this evening. She feels that no one wiser than he. His approval matters most. Sido Yunis.

He has thick peppered hair under his black kuffî head cap and wears a trimmed grey mustache that overshadows his mouth. She remembers imagining what his mouth looked like under the mustache as a child. She has never seen him without it. It is like a permanent thing.

He is a tall burly man, with a large round stomach. And when he came back from long trips, they would run to him laughing and happy to see him. “Sido!” They shouted. He used to catch them on his belly, laugh his smoker’s laugh and hug them tightly. His
belly was so firm, that he would stick it out and ask them to bite it. “Go on!” he would shout, pushing their little heads into his stomach. She could never sink her teeth in it.

He had been a great comfort to her growing up, jolly and wise. She even likes his husky laugh that often times ends in a cough. It always excites her, entertains her. He used to set her on his lap and bounce her on his knee until she could not breath from laughter. He brought her candy from weddings and sandwiches and juice from the markets. She is happy that he will now know her now as a married woman and be proud of her marriage.

Sido was a farmer just like her father, though not as successful. He had told her many times the story of his modest life and how he made a small living off his farm. When her father came of age, he took charge of the farm, expanded it, and made it the great success that it is now. Sido is very proud of Baba, he told her. He had come a long way.

Within an hour more guests arrive for the wedding ceremony. Mama prepared many dishes for them: Mansaf and fattouosh, hummus and pickles, cooked with the vegetables grown in their yard—carrots, potatoes and garlic. These are all foods she loves, and she intends to eat them when the guests leave. The women celebrate in the house and the men celebrate in the yard of their family complex, dancing the debca to the drumming of the tabla. It is always fun to watch the men dance the debca, the way they coordinate their feet. There has always been something attractive about the dance. It seems to bring out their shoulders and their backs, their posture, and the strength in their rhythm.
She can hear Sido’s loud and jolly laughter in the yard. He is excited about a card game.

“Ho!” he laughs. “Another move like that and I’ll tell the yahood who you really are!”

In the midst of the women, Kareem dresses her in the thabab, placing the necklace around her neck, the bracelets on her wrists, and pinning the earrings on her ears. She enjoys receiving the gold. It makes her feel important. They sing and clap in front of her and Kareem, moving their feet and swaying their bodies to the beat of the tubla. There is endless zagahreet, the ululation echoing in their ears. She dances along with them in the center, twirling her wrists and stepping to the beat. She usually despises dancing at events like these, bored by the way women dance, the same motions over and over. But not this evening. Nor does she despise the zaghareet (it usually irritates her ears), nor the folk tunes, nor the attention. She embraces it all on this night. She celebrates her happiness with the people, even though her goal is to part with them. She loves them in these moments, and forgives them for their judgments and their rules. The women observe them in chairs along the walls, clapping and smiling as they celebrate in the center. The men outside smoke argeelah, drink coffee and mint tea, play cards, and discuss political matters.

Jenan, her older sister, is chatting and laughing with the other girls their age, and that prissy little Aliya Tabel. One thing that always irritates Ameena about Jenan is the way she gets along with everyone. No one ever has anything against her. And Jenan often
speaks kindly to girls Ameena does not like. At times, Jenan even defends them! Ameena thinks Jenan is disloyal.

There is a pounding at the door. It halts the festivities.

The singing and clapping stop and the women become quiet, turning their heads to the direction of the pounding. Some of them gasp. They know who it is, or who it might be. They know they are after someone that is probably at this wedding. Maybe more than one.

“It’s the jeish,” they whisper.

Mama runs to the yard to notify Baba. They all feel the unease, especially Ameena, and she rarely feels uneasy. There are too many boys to hide. They are all in the yard.

“Leave!” my mother tells them, and they obey without question. They scatter to the fields.

Within moments, the pounding grows faster and louder. Baba walks into the room and towards the door. Ammy Jalal and Sido Yunis are at his sides. Kareem trails behind them. What is he doing answering the door with them? A proud idiot he always was. She wants to smack him for his stupidity. They look at none of them as they near. Kareem avoids her gaze. They appear un-intimidated but Ameena knows it is because they are conscious of the women watching them.

“Kareem,” she says as low as she can, but loud enough for him to hear. He does not respond.

She wants to shout.
“You should move away,” she says. “You know how they are.”

“Move away, habeeby,” his mother says.

Then Ammy Jalal turns to him and puts his hand to Kareem’s chest. Baba points to the fields where the young men had just scattered.

“Go now,” his father says. “Listen to your mother.”

But there are gunshots, louder than she has ever heard, and the door is broken open. Five armed soldiers stand in the doorway. Outside there are tanks, and more jeish. There must be over fifty of them. They enter, their black muddy boots shuffling and pounding loud on the floor. They begin going through drawers and knocking things over.

“Grab the boy,” one of them says. Two of them take Kareem by the arms. They seize him and put handcuffs around his wrists.

“What is this about?” Ammy Jalal asks.

“We are here for the arrest of Kareem Jalal Yunis. Is this him?” the army man says, pointing to Kareem. “Do not lie. We can identify him ourselves.”

Ammy Jalal puts his face in his hands and nods.

Kareem’s mother grabs hold of her chest, and whimpers. Kareem’s face is serious. Ameena has never his face this way before.

“How is he being arrested?” Ammy Jalal asks.

“That information is classified. If you resist this arrest, there will be problems,” he says to Kareem.
Ammy Jalal looks sternly at the soldiers and shakes his head. “No, no my friends. You’re deeply mistaken. It’s his wedding tonight, and he is innocent. Clearly, he’s been here the whole night!”

Ameena can tell that Ammy Jalal is attempting to appear friendly to the soldiers, to lessen the tension and persuade them to carry on. This is something everyone’s parents have seemed to grow accustomed to. She has seen it often.

The army man shakes his head.

“He is the one. There is no mistake. Do what we say, sir.”

She can see his irritation already. He is probably used to this kind of reaction, and does not tolerate any attempts to persuade them.

“He isn’t even politically active. Be reasonable! Please.”

“Please don’t take my son!” his mother begs. She is sobbing now. “He’s all I have! Please!”

Ameena grips her chest. She cannot believe what she is witnessing. Of all nights, how could this happen?

“If you continue to beg we aren’t going to stay nice.”

“Allah, Allah!” she cries.

More women join his mother in crying. Ameena feels the weight of the shock in her chest. She is unable to cry.

They go to the bookshelf, knock down the books, and tear through pages. Papers from inside the drawers are everywhere. Some, they pocket, others they leave on the floor. They dig up the gardens in the front and back and flip the furniture upside down.
“What is it you’re looking for? Tell me and I’ll find it for you,” Mama says, but they do not answer her.

Ammy Jalal seems unable to act then, and stands dismayed.

His mother is on the verge of fainting, and continues screaming as the other women hold her arms. Ameena looks at him in horror. He starts laughing. Laughing! He always knows how to make jokes of terrible situations, and hardly ever takes anything seriously.

“Don’t look so afraid,” he tells her, looking amused at her facial expression. “I’ll be free in no time."

Sido Yunis sets his hand on the shoulder of the soldier.

“Please,” he says. “This man is a groom tonight. He is an innocent boy. Let him go.”

The army man shrugs his shoulder away from Sido’s grasp and shoves Kareem through door. Kareem’s mother wails louder and falls to the floor. The women gasp and gather around her. Ameena covers her mouth. Her tears come to her. She watches him disappear outside the threshold. She weeps and screams. She chases them out the door and grabs hold of the soldier’s arm. She begs them not to take her husband. She sobs. The soldier moves away from her hands, and speaks to the other soldiers as if she is not near him. They carry a conversation as she stands there sniffling by them. She does not understand what they say. She only knows that they are taking him. That there is not a thing she can do to stop them.
She shouts at them, tells them they are animals, that they have no shame. She shakes her open palms at them. She charges at the one that had come into her home, but Hesham catches her and takes her back into the house. She shouts to them from the door.

“Ya iklab! Ya hameer!”

They shove Kareem into the tank and prepare to leave.

He had been her dearest friend, her only source of escape. They drive away with him, and she feels the loneliness immediately. Everything she wanted is gone. She had been so close to leaving with him, so close to freedom from her parents, from the people. So close to a new life with Kareem, away from the prison that surrounds her. And like the flicker of a dying light, it has disappeared. She wishes that there is someway she can get around it, get him back the next morning, that somehow she can manipulate the situation the way she usually does in circumstances that turn against her liking, but this time she feels her lack of power. Yes, this time, she is smaller.

Jenan comes from behind her.

“Ameena,” she says, setting her hand on her back.

Ameena turns away from Jenan and storms up the stairs, heading for her bedroom. The last thing she wants is Jenan’s consolation. She does not eat the wedding food, nor does she clean up the mess the jeish leave behind.

* 

When she was sixteen, she was engaged to Kareem Jabber, an heir to his father’s wealth. His father is a friend of her father’s, and they became neighbors. Together, they
built successful farms, sharing farmer’s secrets, and expanding their acres over the years. This is how she met Kareem.

At the edge of the field nearest to their houses, their fathers had planted four rows of olive trees. Following those olive trees were two rows of orange trees and a row of fig trees. Her favorite row of trees came last, the lemon trees she always chose to hide in, though she knew Kareem would find her. She could not resist the contrast of the yellow lemons against the green leaves. She admired the colors. And after these rows of trees were grapes, tomatoes and cucumbers that extend almost farther than she can run. Her family makes a living off this farm. It is her father’s pride and joy.

In between their plots of land, a dirt walkway divides the field in half, one half for Kareem’s family, and one half for hers. And in the center of the walkway, there is a well that both of their families share. They share almost everything, and help each other in a neighborly manner.

Kareem and Ameena were inseparable as children. They played in the fields until dinner, and sometimes, even after the sun had long gone down. A few times in the night, they snuck out after their parents had fallen asleep. They hid in the wheat fields, in trees, under plants and behind wells. They raced each other. Kareem used to shove her to the ground, then point at her and rumble a laugh. She was swift with retaliation, and chased him until she was able to throw him into the red dirt. Other times, he tossed unripened fruits at her, knocking her hard in the head. But this is precisely why she liked him. One thing she could not stand was people who were kind, and she could hardly bear being kind to others. Along with their siblings, they would play throughout the fields until they
were not allowed to anymore. When they grew older, they became conscious of all who watched, and their parents forbade them. “People will start to talk,” they said.

Kareem and Ameena stopped speaking to each other as they continued growing older, and avoided eye contact when others were around. But she had always been certain that Kareem belonged to her. For as long as she can remember, she believed she would marry him. And when she was fifteen, she began noticing his gazes, and her beliefs were reaffirmed. Often times at their family dinner parties their eyes met from across the room. Kareem watched her, and she felt it, meeting his gaze in indifference to the people around them; she is sure they caught them plenty of times, but she did not care. It was difficult for her to remove her eyes from his. They were so brightly blue, twinkling under his dark brows when the room was lit. But the feature she loves most about him is his thick black hair that is always brushed neatly atop his head.

About a year before his arrest, before he had asked for her hand, Kareem squatted next to her under her olive tree and lifted the branches that were covering her face.

“If I ask your father for your hand in marriage, would you be happy?”

It was strange to her at first, because they knew they were not allowed to be alone together, and they hardly ever spoke. They knew it would be awkward if people were around. She has always been conscious of the things they are not allowed to do, but she never feels guilty when she breaks the rules. They started speaking to each other regularly, even when people were near. Almost everyone within their families presumed they had their eyes on one another. When Mama realized how fond of him she was, Mama began suggesting older suitors.
“I’ll marry whom I want to marry, and you will have no say,” she replied. And she had succeeded. It was not often that she could force them to allow her to do the things she wanted and she was happy to get what she wanted this time, without having to worry about not meeting their expectations. She resisted them often but she hardly ever won her battles with them. She was not allowed to go to Ramallah with girlfriends, nor the market down the street without her mother, father, or brother. It seems she caused them so much trouble that eventually they realized that they were happy to be rid of her. Thankfully, Kareem was her neighbor, and within her grasp, and since his father and her father were best friends, they felt comfortable with her marrying him. His family complex was right next to theirs. And because Kareem was the first to ask for her hand, she never had to fight off any other suitors. She was very lucky to have found someone whom her parents were satisfied with. If not, she would have had to put up a strong fight, and God knows if she would have been successful at that one.

He began leaving her notes in her bedroom, slipping in unnoticed when their mothers were busy with gossip. He would leave them in her closet, in her dresser drawers and under her pillow, telling her where to meet him. Sometimes they met in the wheat fields. Other times in the olive groves or in the garden. They would lounge around for hours, breathing in the crisp night air and talking of the future. They forgot about the threats around them.

And the night before the wedding, she let loose her long chocolate braids and applied black kohli to her eyes.
“You’d better watch out,” Jenan whispered to her in the night as she prepared herself. “Our uncle’s houses are all around us, and you never know when their nosy wives and daughters are watching.” Jenan always followed the rules and it always irritated Ameena. It is why Ameena never respected her much. Jenan had no backbone.

“If we get caught, what are they going to do? Break off our engagement? We’re practically married for God’s sake. Besides, Kareem and I know how to be inconspicuous.”

Then she set out into the fields. Her smile was relentless when she saw him waiting there for her, sprawled out in the stalks of wheat, and she was well practiced when it came to controlling smiles.

They lay in the wheat fields and ate the teen that they had picked from their family fields. At times, the supply was heavenly, and she did not realize how simple of a pleasure had so much value. As usual, she ate more than her stomach could handle, but that never stopped her.

“Ouch,” she said, holding her stomach as the pains kicked in.

“Who taught you to overeat that way? I’m sure it was your mother. I’ve seen her eat.”

Ameena laughed. “I’ll be sure to let my mother know you think so. You’re one to talk. I only eat a third of what you eat!”

“That’s a lie for sure! I eat like a bird. You eat so swiftly that I don’t even see you doing it, let alone see how much you devour. One second the plate is full, and the next its empty. Who’s to say how much you eat in private?”
“That’s the proper way to eat for a lady.”

This time he laughed, and she always felt successful when he laughed at the things she said.

“Can we go to the beach soon?” she asked. “I want to get away from the countryside.” She had seen many movies with women in swimsuits at the beach. She too intended on wearing a swimsuit and walking the shore like those women.

“Of course. I'll take you everywhere in Palestine,” he said. He smirked.

“What a mean tease!” She shoved him. “You know there’s nothing left to see here, and I’ve already seen what there is to see. Take me to Paris, to Istanbul!”

“What do I look like? Your personal bank account?”

“That’s the cost of marrying a pretty girl like me. If you want a worthy wife, you have to pay the cost.” She sticks her nose in the air.

“You are conceited. What about the cinema? I'll take you to the movies!”

“Anywhere but here is fine with me. I can’t wait to get out of this place.”

“Why? Nablus can be beautiful too. Besides, it might not last, the way things are looking now.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He laughed. “You amuse me. The war is never over, Ameena! The occupation is growing stronger and stronger, and the people are growing more and more angry.”

“Do you think the army will take all that’s left?”
“It’s clear isn’t it?” He scratched his head. “The British have paved the way for them. Soon there will be more settlers in Nablus than Arabs.”

She sighed.

“Well, look at us. We have no army, no organization. We only have our silly culture, what’s left of our farms, and crazy mujahedeen that have lost their sanity. We have no smart leaders, and any time we retaliate, we’re punished.” He sat up and looked down at her.

“The Jewish have the support of the most powerful countries in the world. No matter what happens, no matter what we do, things will always be in their favor. As long as they have that support. And we have nothing,” he said.

These were things she knew already, but she had not paid them much attention. She had forgotten the war since her engagement. When she was a child, Baba told her that God hates the Jews. They are treacherous, deceitful. They betrayed God after He saved them from the Pharaoh. He ordered them to fight in His name, but they told Moses: you and your God, go and fight. We will we wait here for you. Ameena remembers this story always.

“Let’s get out of here as quickly as possible,” she said. “Promise me.”

“Sure. I want out as much as you do. We’ll probably have to leave soon anyway.”

She quickly forgot worries in those days, and she hardly ever worried about anything. Nor did she remember this conversation in the days after. They watched overhead, the twinkling stars like sugar against the black night sky. And in that moment, she cherished those stars.
The next morning, on the day before their wedding, she looked out of her bedroom window and saw Kareem working in the fields. She fingered her hair and checked her reflection in the mirror. She decided to pay him a visit. She never wore a veil when she left the house, though her mother often tried to persuade her to. She got so fed up with Mama one day that she ripped the veil from Mama’s hands, threw it on the floor, and stamped her feet on it. “This is what I think of your veil,” she told Mama.

Kareem was always deep into their land, picking lemons and placing them into wooden boxes. Some days he worked in both her father’s fields and his, if both could make use of him. She walked through the rows of trees in his direction. When she reached him, he looked down at her from his ladder and smiled, shielding his eyes from the sun.

“Come to visit me already?”

“I was walking over to visit your mother, actually, and I decided to check up on you,” she lied. He was conceited enough as it was. “I had to make sure you weren’t slacking off.”

“I see,” he said, eyeballing her. “I think you're making excuses,” he continued, climbing down the ladder. “You simply enjoy visiting me. After seeing me last night, I thought you’d be sick of me by now.”

She laughed. “Why are you so sure that I came to see you?”

“Well, there was no need for you to come and check up on me. I've worked these fields my whole life without the need for you to check up on me. And it's obvious that I
wasn't conveniently in your path to my mother's house. You came out of your way. You like having a reason to come see me.” He smirked.

She chuckled. “Don’t be so foolish. It’s only right that I stop by and make sure everything's going smoothly out here. You might have gotten hurt without anyone knowing, and you would've had me to thank for helping you,” she said.

“First you said you were checking to see if I was slacking off, and now you say you’re concerned about my safety. So which is?”

She glared at him.

“You can’t bear to be away from me for more than an hour.”

She laughed and turned, heading toward his father’s house.

It was moments like these that she could not forget after he was gone.
Chapter 2:  
The Lawyer

It was easy to love Kareem in all of his charm and handsomeness, and it was hard to forget him in his absence. She did not realize that she could have the best of everything, until she had it and lost it.

She does not sleep. She is grave. She is solemn, still as the rocks outside. She cannot sleep until she sees him again. She aches. A panic is stuck in her chest, as she lies awake in the night. There is no comfort in her breathing; she can barely accomplish it. She imagines that he suffers, and she suffers with him. She sees him being hanged, the strain in his face, his feet dangling above the sand. She sees the soldiers surrounding him, shooting him all at once, his body riveting as the bullets hit him, his eyes rolling back to his head. She shuts her eyes tight and forces the images out of her mind.

In the gloomy morning, she can see him clearly in the photograph on her bedside table. It is the only view she will have of him, a reminder of what feels like a permanent loss. She turns the picture down on the table.

She walks to the shower. The jeish cut the water out again, and she cannot shower. She really wants a shower. She is not dirty, but she needs warmth. When she was younger, her Tata swore at them each time they cut out the water. Kuss ukhthim, she would say. Ya raabi, what will we do without water today? We can’t wash the clothes, or water the zaytoon, God rest her soul. Ameena goes back to her bed.
It was awful to be robbed of her wedding night, her first time fully embracing the man she loved. She would have put her hands on his strong chest, brought them up to his shoulders, to his neck, would have wrapped her arms around it, holding him as tightly as possible, never letting him slip from beneath her fingers again. She prays to God for his protection. Why couldn’t they have shown him some mercy? Why did they have to be so cruel to him on his wedding night? When will she see him again?

One of the most painfully wrenching parts about being human is the constant reunion with uncertainty.

Tears leak down the side of her face and into her hair, warm and soothing until she wipes them away on her blankets.

Mama and Jenan come into her room to console her. She does not want them to come in. She wants to be left alone.

“Come down stairs and eat, habeebty. You haven’t eaten,” Mama says. They stand over her bed and look down at her. She rolls over.

“No. I don’t want to eat.”

“Please, just come down. I don’t want you to get sick. You aren’t well,” Mama says.

“I’m not going to get sick. Just get out of my room, and leave me alone.”

“You’re going to get thin and look ill.”

They will not be quiet. She takes a deep breath into her pillow.

“He won’t be in jail for long,” Jenan says. “Just look forward to when he comes home.”

25
Ameena is hopeless. She feels that Jenan is attempting to persuade her into believing in false hope and false hope is something that agitates her always. Why should anyone allow themselves to be tortured with ideas that can never be real?

“You know they can keep him for however long they wish to. They can do whatever they want to him,” she says.

“Don’t think that way. Pray to God that he gets out soon,” Jenan says. She begins sweeping.

“Prayer does nothing,” Ameena says. She does not pay much mind to the power of dua’.

“Estughfar Allah,” Mama says. “Just come down and we’ll talk to your father about where he is.”

She is not ready to go downstairs. She does not want to sit with anyone. She needs space from what used to be her usual life.

“Get out now!” she says.

Mama leaves the room with a sigh, but when Ameena lifts her pillow she sees that Jenan is still sweeping the floors of her bedroom. Why does Jenan do it? She wonders why Jenan feeds the goats every morning too. She is not obligated to. She took up the task herself and asked Baba to make it her chore instead of the employees. Ameena thinks Jenan is an idiot for doing so. Goats are disgusting and filthy. Why would anyone want to feed them? As Jenan finishes collecting the pile of dust, she begins sweeping it into the dustpan. She tuts in frustration as she attempts to collect the motes that fly away. She sighs. This is why Ameena rarely sweeps.
“Goodness,” Jenan says. “There will be no dust and no sweeping in heaven.”

Ameena thinks about Jenan getting married. If she becomes a bride, she will have all that Ameena was stripped of on the night of her wedding.

“You're happy this happened to me,” she says. “Now you have nothing to be jealous about.” She is curled up in her blankets, watching Jenan sweep.

Jenan does not respond to this and continues sweeping the cream colored tile of her bedroom with a concerned look on her face. Then, she takes a seat next to Ameena on her bed.

“Ameena,” she says, setting her hand on her thigh. “The Rasool, salla Allahu ‘aleihy wa sallam, said: ‘Whatever happened to you, couldn't have missed you, and whatever missed you, couldn't have happened to you.”

Ameena says nothing. She does not understand.

“What happened was meant to happen. It is not in your hands. There was nothing you could do to stop it. You have to let it be.”

“It shouldn’t have happened at all.”

“You have to pray for Allah’s help, and be confident that He’ll bring him back to you. God will guide you out of this.”

“Be quiet. I don’t want to talk about this.” The last person’s pity she wants is Jenan’s. She is sure Jenan is happy that she has no reason to be jealous of Ameena anymore.

“Alright, I’m going. But, remember this. Why should God help you if you’re not confident in His help?”

27
Jenan finishes sweeping up as much of the dust as she can and leaves the room. Ameena always hated the way Jenan acted so innocent and perfect, as if she never did anything wrong. At times, Ameena can barely stand her. Ameena thinks of her as fake and complacent. She hated the way Jenan never took charge and stood up to their parents. Ameena is the one who had to stand up to them. She never got their parents to allow them to do anything fun. She never took her on special outings the way older siblings should. She never surprised her with gifts or candy. She simply sat around each day quiet and boring, always concentrating on something the rest of them could not see. She hated the way Jenan always did what Mama asked of her without complaining. And Mama was always preparing Jenan for marriage, buying her extravagant party dresses and rouge. It is a shame since Jenan does not want to marry. Ameena thinks Mama should have done it all for her instead.

Ameena hated Jenan in the days she had blossomed before her. Before Ameena had become pleased with her own reflection, all she could think about were Jenan’s green eyes. She hated Jenan’s green eyes, because she did not have them.

But most of all, she hated that Kareem’s mother preferred Jenan for him.

Before Kareem had asked for her hand, Amty Jameela, had visited them one evening, and was chatting in the family room with Mama and Jenan. Ameena had hoped that she had come to let Mama know that Kareem was interested in her. She was too nervous to come say hello to her, though she intended to after eavesdropping on their conversation. She watched them from the banisters, crouching at the foot of the stairs.
“What do you think of my son Kareem? He is in search of a bride,” Amty asked Jenan. Amty is a thin woman, calm but humorous. She joked so often that most times Ameena could not tell whether she was serious or not. But this time, Ameena knew she was. She could see the discomfort in both Mama and Jenan after the question was asked. But Ameena still thinks Jenan was secretly thrilled to have heard this. Everyone grew quiet, and Jenan giggled a nervous giggle. They both knew Ameena had her heart set on Kareem, and Ameena is sure his mother did too. But most mothers would prefer Jenan to herself. She is the obedient, proper daughter. The well-behaved balwa.

And Jenan knew that Kareem was not really searching for a bride. It took Jenan a minute to stop giggling and find the words.

“I think Kareem is a respectable young man, Amty,” she said, and then she glanced at Ameena behind the staircase. They made eye contact, and it appeared as though Ameena’s secret presence shocked Jenan, because Jenan’s mouth was still open and she could not continue speaking. Ameena fled up the stairs before she had to hear anymore of Jenan’s betrayal.

She did not need to hear the rest of the conversation. She was convinced that Jenan was attempting to accept Amt Jameela’s proposal. When they were younger, she had mentioned how attractive she thought Kareem was, and they both were fond of him, though Ameena thinks Jenan did not want to admit it because she feared competition with Ameena. Jenan never bothered wanting something if Ameena wanted it. But still, Jenan would attempt to joke with him at times, and it seemed she wanted his attention. This bothered Ameena, because she told Jenan that she was going to marry him. And
sometimes, Kareem gave Jenan attention too. Ameena hated it, because Jenan was more beautiful than her in those days. Perhaps Jenan thought that because she was more beautiful than Ameena, Kareem would choose her in the end.

Jenan never understood the dynamism she possessed, and never used it. It was never in her nature to grasp a power firmly with her hand and withhold it. Ameena can never see her being any different. Jenan pretends as if she does not want attention, but Ameena sees how she enjoys it when others give it to her. She smiles and blushes and giggles. Ameena has always wanted to stand out.

Jenan never takes advantage. Nor does she ever express her pain openly; they have to pry it out of her. Ameena wonders how deep Jenan’s wounds really feel, trapped inside her for so long.

No one understood where Jenan had gotten that beautiful wavy blonde hair or those striking green eyes. It was a mystery. Perhaps it came from an ancestor that lived way back, one that escaped their memories—no one was certain. Regardless, Jenan was like a jewel when she walked into a room, a perennial beauty, enchanting, but acted as if she were blind to it. Ameena was sure she knew just how beautiful she was; she was simply attempting modesty, the way Ameena saw it. When she smiled her teeth were bright and her eyes glistened.

After Amty left, Jenan came into her bedroom.

Why didn’t you come down the stairs? Amty Jameela wanted to speak with you, Jenan said.

Why were you talking to my future mother in law? Ameena replied.
Am I not allowed to speak with her?

No. She’s my future mother in law. Not yours.

Well, she was talking to me.

You’re making it obvious that you want to marry one of her boys.

I was just being polite. You know I don’t care about getting married.

I was just being polite, Ameena mocked. You always have to do the same things that I do.

Don’t worry. I’m not trying to imitate you and marry into the same family.

I know why you’re turning down other suitors now, Ameena said. You want Kareem. You’ve always wanted him. If you hadn’t seen me listening, you probably would’ve agreed to it. Kareem is mine, she said. He doesn’t care about you. Stay away from him.

But I don’t want him.

You’re a liar, a pretender.

Why would I lie about this? I could never do anything like that to you!

You used me like a toy, like a doll. You’re selfish.

How? How have I used you?

You know what you did—prancing around his mother so she would notice you. And you wanted me around to make yourself look better.

That isn’t true at all. I told her that you and Kareem were a better match.

I don’t want to hear your lies anymore. You always act so perfect but I can see how evil you really are. Get out, now, Ameena said, raising her voice.
Why do you have call me evil? You know I’m not evil and you’re not being fair.
You left before I could finish what I was saying and I was trying to let her know politely
that I wasn’t interested.

_Uff_, Ameena said. Get out!

Ameena knew that Jenan could not stand being called evil, so she called her it
every time Jenan made her angry or irritated her. Jenan left her room in what seemed like
defeat. Ameena always gets the last say with Jenan. She knows strategically how to
defeat Jenan in argument. If Jenan ever says something that upsets Ameena, Ameena says
whatever it is that makes Jenan weakest, whatever Jenan is most sensitive about, like her
thinness or the way she speaks like a baby. Because Ameena knows that Jenan will not
retaliate once Ameena says the worst thing she can say to Jenan. She knows that Jenan
will give up, that Jenan would not think of saying something as cruel to her, because she
fears an even greater blow from Ameena. Sometimes, Jenan makes fair points. But
somehow, Ameena can always belittle Jenan’s points. She is good at arguing. And Jenan
never shouts, she just grows quiet, and sighs. That’s how Ameena knows when Jenan is
angry. She does not curse or throw things at her. She does not make fun, the way Ameena
makes fun of her. And even though Ameena hurts her, and angers her, Jenan always,
always forgives Ameena after.

Ameena and Jenan disagree about many things. But she does not hate her. She
does not know why she acts this way to Jenan. Perhaps it is because Jenan allows her to.
There is something about Jenan that irritates her.
After his mother came over, Ameena told Kareem what happened. She wanted to know why his mother had said what she said. Kareem said that his mother wanted him to marry Jenan. She chose Jenan first. His mother said Jenan was God-fearing—a pious woman, calm and nurturing, and that she was the most beautiful girl in all of Nablus, in all of Palestine. He told Ameena he needed time to convince his family that Ameena was the right woman for him, the woman he wanted.

Ameena had decided after that conversation to hate Jenan. She tried not to speak to her for the next few weeks, but Jenan spoke to her anyway. She tried not to be around Jenan, but Jenan came around anyway. And that is something Ameena will never understood about Jenan. How easily she forgives.

When Sido Yunis noticed that she did not reply to Jenan’s questions at dinner, or when Jenan spoke to her when they all sat together in the family room, he took Ameena aside.

You are not speaking to Jenan. That is haram, he said.

So? Ameena said.

Sido gave her a concerned look. Wal? What’s this so?

She shrugged.

Whatever it is, forgive her. It’s haram to hold a grudge against your sister, your blood.

I’d be an idiot to forgiver her. I need to teach her a lesson.
The person who is kind and forgiving is no idiot, he said. The person who is kind and forgiving is smarter than the person who is angry, because he doesn’t let his anger poison his mind and his heart. He doesn’t let his anger ruin his happiness.

She tried to steal from me, Sido, she said.

How do you know that? Do you have any proof?

I have all the proof I need.

What did she try to steal from you?

She did not reply because she did not want to say. Sido did not need to know about her love for Kareem. But he smiled and she is sure he knew anyway.

One of the most maddening emotions is paranoia, he said more sternly, pointing his finger repeatedly to his temple. When you are paranoid of something, the fear of it can take over your thoughts and your energy. Small things will lead you to suspicion and conspiracy. They will lead you to make false assumptions with the lack of enough evidence. In the end, paranoia will lead you to ignorance, he said.

Sido Yunis had always told her that she could not continue fighting everyone and everything. But her spirit is beyond her. Somehow, she is not responsible for the way she feels. She did not want to forgive Jenan because she did not understand her. Nor did she understand Sido Yunis’s words.

* 

Ameena lies on her bed.

But, remember this. Why should God help you when you’re not confident in His help? Jenan had said. God will guide you out of this.
She remembers those words and feeling their opposition. She cannot digest them; she thinks about them for some time. She has to repeat them to herself, to adjust to them so that she can understand. She can never understand Jenan’s words.

The hours pass in her bedroom. Ameena decides that Jenan is right. For once, she has understood her. Ameena must be certain that God is capable of changing things, of bringing Kareem home to her.

She forgets reality and remains within her thoughts. She lingers in her bedroom. She turns again to the comfort of her tears. She allows what has happened to be. She lets it go with her tears and releases her frustration in the form of wetness. Her tears are her only comfort. She does not wipe them away. She lets them heat her cheeks as they leak down her face. They turn cool and soothing. The coolness that follows as they dry and settle. She lets them linger with her.

She promises herself that she will come away from this. Kareem will be free soon. She will not worry about how she will do it. She will find a way. Only this promise alleviates the panic in her chest, the weight of the burden that is inevitable—but not for any longer. She will get him out.

Her crying has eased her. She will speak with her parents. They will take her to Israel. She decides it is time to go downstairs.

“Take me into Israel where they are keeping him. I’m going to get him out,” she says to Mama.

“You must be crazy,” Mama says. “His parents have already found him a lawyer and they are doing everything they can to get him out.”
“I want to see him.”

“They never allow visitors. You should know that.”

“Maybe they’ll change their minds. Maybe I can convince them.”

“You can’t.”

She stops to think for a minute. She needs another idea. “I want to talk to the lawyer.”

“Let the men take care of that. You can ask your father tonight.”

“No. I want to speak with the lawyer myself.”

“You don’t need to worry yourself with this kind of business. You can’t do anything about it anyway. It’s not in your hands.”

“I won’t eat until you let me speak with him.”

Mama sighs. “You’re so stubborn. Always.”

Mama has always been concerned about them eating when they have no appetite, or when something unfortunate had befallen them, and often begged them to finish their food, even after they had grown. She never passed up a bargain that involved getting them to eat.

“Tonight when you’re father gets home, you can ask him to get you the lawyer’s phone number. You sit down now and eat this bamya.”

She hates bamya. Soggy boiled okra has never been her food preference, even though she enjoys the tomato-y soup they soak in and the chunks of beef, but she has already made the deal with Mama, and she has always hated going back on her word. The
sudden determination to bring Kareem back gives her a new appetite. She must shut her stomach up. So she eats.

*

At night, Baba made a phone call and was able to get her the phone number of the lawyer. She tells him she wants to ask the lawyer questions about Kareem’s arrest, and he feels she has the right to inquire. He gives the telephone number to her. She cannot call until morning, because his office has already closed. She goes to telephone and dials anyway. There is no answer. She goes to bed. It will be another torturous, sleepless night. She tosses, turns, tosses turns, until dawn breaks.

It becomes morning and she wearily runs down the stairs to the telephone. Her heart is already beating fast. She dials the number. His name is Amin Latif. He has probably stepped out of his office or is busy with a client because he does not answer. She calls ten times more, her breath growing more difficult with each ring. On the eleventh call, he answers, and she almost stops breathing altogether.

“Hello, I’m Kareem Yunis’ wife,” she says, after a long pause.

“How can I help you?”

“I….” she grips the telephone cord in her free hand. “I want to know what it’s going to take to get him out.” She forces back the lump in her throat.

It sounds like he took a deep breath. “Well, that’s always difficult to tell in arrests like these—”

“But it’s not an arrest. It’s a kidnapping. They haven’t even charged him with a crime. So they can’t keep him for long, can they?”
“Mrs. Yunis, you have to understand that your husband is a young Palestinian man, and that makes him a threat, whether he is guilty of a crime or not.”

The lump in her throat grows. It is the first time she has been called Mrs. Yunis.

“But there’s no justice in that,” she says. The lump can be heard in the cracking of her voice.

“This is true.”

“How long do you think they’ll keep him? Please tell me.”

“There is no way to be sure when they will release him. In cases like these, the prisoners are not tried since there are no charges made.”

“Mr. Latif, you’re still not answering my question. Please, be blunt with me. I can handle the truth,” she lies. But she can do nothing until she knows the truth.

He is quiet for a moment, probably deciding whether being blunt with her is a good idea or a bad one.

“His arrest could last anywhere from months to years. There’s no telling,” he says.

_Year_. She holds back the lump in her throat to continue their conversation. She does not want the lawyer to see that she has overestimated her own emotional capabilities. She had already known that the truth would not be good, so she accepts his words, but not as fact. She hopes it will only be months.

“They’re going to keep him as long as they please, aren’t they?”

“Most likely.”

“When can I see him?”
“Well, we don’t know where they are keeping him in Israel. They rarely release that information, so, there’s no telling.”

“But how can they not let prisoners see their families?”

“I understand Mrs. Yunis. But these are questions I can’t answer. I can’t speak for them. I’m sorry.”

“Can’t I call him at least?”

“I’m afraid there’s no way we can contact him until they tell us where they’re keeping him.”

She is quiet. She wants to think of another question to ask him. She is not ready to give up on the only outlet she has so far.

“What kind of prison are they keeping him at? You must tell me.”

He hesitates again. “It’s a military prison.”

A military prison. Her chest feels heavy, clustered.

“And what…” She grips her chest. “What do they do to prisoners in those kinds of prisons?”

“It’s best if you don’t ask questions like these, Mrs. Yunis.”

She had decided to allow herself to cry only once a day and no more than once. She releases it now, sobbing and wailing.

“But when can I do then?”

“I’m very sorry Mrs. Yunis. But there is almost nothing you can do.”

“I’m going to every military prison in Israel and I’m going to see—”

“You’re just a little frantic and desperate at the moment, but it will pass.”
“Excuse me sir, but I am not crazy, and I’m not joking either. I will go and see him.”

“You wouldn’t get past the checkpoints, and you can’t enter Israel. A lady has no more power than an Arab man there. All your shouting and screaming won’t change their minds—”

“Never mind that. I’m going tomorrow.”

“You’re going to have to be patient about this all. That’s really the only advice I can give you. And keep in mind that most prisoners aren’t allowed access to lawyers, so you have a better chance than most.”

“Lawyer or no lawyer, I’ll get him out myself if I have to.”

“Mrs. Yunis—”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Latif. I greatly appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Alright then, Salaam.”

She hangs up. She goes into the kitchen where why her parents are sitting.

“I’m going into Israel to find out where he is. I need someone to drive me there.”

“Ya salam? Are you now?” Baba says, his face amused.

“Be patient, habeebty. You’re starting to sound like a mad woman,” Mama says.

“I don’t care! I have to find out where is! Why am I trying harder than you adults? His own parents aren’t looking for him the way I am.”

Baba shakes his head. She knows he is already frustrated with her, and frustration has always been something instant with his personality.
“You are being crazy. What happened is unjust, but you are acting ridiculous instead of being patient. This is not how you should be acting,” Baba says.

Mama sighs. “These are the circumstances. There’s nothing we can do! Make dua. Allah will take care of it. You must be patient.”

“Why can’t you just take me to Israel!”

Baba huffs. “You are so foolish, really. You act like going into Israel is something easy.”

“You know there’s no way, Ameena.” Mama says sternly.

“I’ll sneak in.”

“Ya Allah! Are you trying to get yourself thrown in jail too?”

“Maybe then I could find him.”

Baba chuckles, but she can see that it is an angry chuckle. When he was angry, uncontrollably angry, he always attempted to disguise his anger with a chuckle, and with much failure, because he would always snap just moments after that frightening chuckle. She calls it frightening because once they heard it, they knew that his revenge, his vehemence against whatever their unintentional offenses were, would certainly follow. It is like the rumble before an earthquake.

“There has to be someway I can get in!” she says earnestly.

“Get out of here and go upstairs! Ya hayawana!” he shouts. His brows are low and fierce and his lower lip sags when he finishes his words. It always sags when he is at his angriest.
She had known his temper was rising, but she could not stop herself from her own inner insistence, so she accepts that she had pushed his boundaries and stomps up the stairs, not saying another word. She lays down on her bed, trying to plan a way to find Kareem. All she can do is think about was how she can turn things around. But the facts and the reality are all there in the front of her mind, though she tries to push them back. How will she ever get him back? She has a hard time accepting that alone and without help, she can do nothing but wait.
Mama calls Jenan down to wash the dishes. Ameena sits in front of the television and folds laundry. Jenan comes down the stairs and begins washing the dishes.

Obedience is Jenan’s cursed trait. When someone asks of her something, she does it without consciousness. Ameena wonders if Jenan ever hates this about herself. If Jenan ever wishes to be more like Ameena.

Jenan has always been tolerant. People always ask her for favors, because they know she is too kind to turn them away. Once she confessed to Ameena that she dislikes helping those whom she feels take advantage of her, like Mama, because she can hardly ever bring herself to ask others for things. She hates bothering others, because she herself hates being bothered when she is busy. She has always been a selfless, fearful human being. She fears conflict and the disapproval of others; she fears everything. This is why she tolerates everyone and everything. Once, she told Ameena that she does not trust many people, but this has never been apparent from the outside. She is kind to everyone.

When someone attempts to take advantage of her, Jenan always rejects them in a safe manner to avoid conflict. She never tells them “No” outright. She tells them politely, because she cannot bear it when someone is upset with her. When their childhood friend, Abeer, had accused Jenan of lying about being too ill to come over, she fretted and worried for hours, and Ameena was the one who had to listen to it, though she did not tolerate it for every long.
Why doesn’t she believe me? I’ve never lied to her before. She’s angry and hurt, and so she isn’t thinking straight. Do you think she’ll ever forgive me? Jenan went on.

Eventually Ameena snapped. Who cares? Really, she said.

Jenan rarely seems to enjoy life, nor has she ever been adventurous. Each day, she cleans, prays and cooks. She walks in the garden. She rarely breaks away from this routine. She reads Quran. “I trust nothing more than God’s words,” she once said.

Someone knocks hard at the back door in the kitchen. They know it is their regular visitor. Khalto Laila never goes without seeing Mama at least every week. And surely enough, she arrives just as they are finishing up the laundry. She always came early in the morning, when most of them were tired or still sleeping. Most days they heard her shouting from their bedrooms at the television or having a loud debate with Baba. Mama notices her in the garden and shouts to her from the window.

“Come inside Laila! I’ll make the tea!” she says.

Jenan is washing the dishes. Ameena hardly ever participates in washing dishes. They rarely challenge her because they prefer avoiding her temper. Mama always asks Ameena to do the easier chores because that is all Ameena tolerates. They can afford to keep maids, and Ameena still does not understand why they dismissed theirs. It is Jenan’s fault. She never believed in keeping them. She hated causing others to feel inferior to her. It was stupid of her.

“Welkum! Hey!” Khalto Laila says from the other side of the door, knocking continuously.
“Coming Laila!” We hear Mama shout from one of the windows on the second floor. Khalto Laila is older than Mama, and very impatient. Whenever they did not answer the telephone or the door immediately, Khalto Laila would get angry and scold them. Mama does not want to upset her.

“Get the door girls! It’s your Khalto Laila!” Mama says.

Jenan stops washing and runs to answer the door. As she opens it, they can see that Khalto Laila has an irritated look on her face.


“Wel! Shu ida’wa! What took you so long? I have good news for you yakhtee! Where is your mother?” she asks. She is out of breath. She has walked to their complex from the lower lands of town. She loves the exercise and wants always to be fit. She is not a large woman, nor a small one, but all women watch their weight after they have aged.

Khalto Laila steps inside. She has already forgotten her irritation and is smiling and laughing; she always was a boisterous woman. Ameena cannot remember the last time she seen Khalto sad. Only angry or happy.

Ameena can tell that Jenan is not anticipating Khalto Laila’s “Good news.” Jenan tells Khalto Laila that Mama will be down in a minute.

“O! Laila!” Mama says. “Here I come!”

Jenan sets a pot of water on the stove for tea. Mama comes down the marble stairs shortly after, out of breath and excited. They greet each other with a simple salam and sit at the kitchen table. Ameena leaves to her bedroom, but she can still hear
Khalto Laila from down the hall. They can always hear Khalto from anywhere in the house, even the other side. She is a loud woman. It is always as if she is in the same room as them. Ameena does not care to be close to their chatter today, the way she usually loves to. Khalto Laila always brings the best sort of gossip. But Ameena’s thoughts are still consumed with what the lawyer had told her. Khalto Laila notices that Ameena leaves the room after her arrival. Ameena did not hug her happily and say hello the way she always does. Ameena wants to avoid the pity.

“How is Ameena? She must be heartbroken.” Khalto Laila says.

“She is coping,” Jenan says.

“Where did she go?”

“Her bedroom. She hardly comes out,” Mama says.

Khalto Laila tuts. “There’s no telling how long it will be until we find him.”

Mama sighs.

“May Allah protect him. I must go to her.” Khalto Laila says. “Ameena! Where are you habeeby?”

Ameena does not answer immediately, because she does not want to. She knows what will happen. It takes every ounce of energy in her to say: “I’m here, Khalto.”

Khalto Laila walks into her bedroom.

“Habeeby. There, there.” She stretches out her arms and embraces Ameena tight. She is warm and soft, and Ameena cries, as she knew she would. Khalto Laila rubs her back.
“Lah Lah,” she says. “He’ll be back soon. God will fix it.” She begins crying with Ameena.

“Come. Come sit with us. Don’t be alone. It’s not good for you.”

Ameena sniffs and follows Khalto Laila back into the kitchen.

Kalto Laila turns to Jenan as she sits quietly beside Mama. “And why has your younger sister married before you, Jenan? Don’t you want to get married?” she asks her.

Jenan hesitates at this question as she always does. She becomes quiet and uncomfortable. Her shoulders are tense. She opens her mouth to speak again, then stops.

“In due time, Khalto. Everything is destiny,” she says. The question seems to always catch her off her guard. It always takes her a minute to compose herself. Ameena always wonders why Jenan has not married yet too.

“Well it seems a man has taken an interest in you, and they’ve asked me to speak with your parents. Aren’t you excited?” Khalto Laila says.

Jenan blinks. Her eyes dart from left to right. She pauses for a long time.

“Oh, come on, aren’t you?”

Jenan does an embarrassed giggle.

Khalto Laila chuckles. “You’re so excited, you’re stunned!!”

“Why shouldn’t I be excited?” she says. She has always been a terrible liar.

Ameena knows her body language, and she understands her reaction. Ameena knows that Jenan is not happy that there is another proposal for her, but Ameena still does not know why.
“And who is this man, Laila?” Mama asks. But Ameena’s attention is focused on Jenan. Her face has become somber as soon as Mama and Khalto Laila have become distracted.

“Saif Hamdan. The son of Sufyan Hamdan from the Thabata family. You know what a great family they are. And he is a handsome boy! They’ll be a lovely couple!”

Ameena remembers seeing Saif at a few weddings. He is very, very attractive. And he is rich. All the girls were jealous when he married years ago. Ameena thinks Jenan is lucky that the proposal is not from a fat older friend of Baba’s. He would have surely approved of her marrying one of his friends. What more could she ask for?

“The one whose wife just passed?” Mama asks.

“Yes, poor dear. She died during childbirth. She died so young. It’s so sad. They lost the baby too. The poor boy lost his mind, they say.”


“Yes. He’s all alone now. May Allah give him strength.” Ameena is irritated that they are speaking of such sad things around her.

“Ya haram,” Mama says.

“Yes, but everything happens for a reason, and now he needs to remarry. Jenan is the best girl to marry in town. And he is the best man in town!”

“Such good news, Laila. This will be perfect for Jenan.”

Jenan’s chest is rhythmically rising up and falling down at this point. It seems like she is attempting to remain calm. Her mouth is unsmiling.
“Mashi. I’ll tell Umm Saif on my way home, and they’ll come and ask for Jenan’s hand soon.”

“Well tell us more about the groom first!” Mama says.

“Well, he’s the proper age. He’s 26, and Jenan is twenty, right?”

“Tab imneeh!” Mama said. “It really is time. She can’t wait forever, and she can’t keep saying no. Her father is beginning to complain.”

“It is time. She is older than Ameena, and she can’t wait forever.”

“The Hamdans you said? Do you know them well?”

“Yes, they are a successful family. And the boy is very well off. They say he is a very good man, and handsome too. I’ve seen him.”

“Tab yallah why not! But we don’t know his family that well. And don’t say anything until I’ve spoken with Jabber. He’ll get upset if I agree to anything without his consent. Perhaps he’ll know something about the boy.”

Khalto Laila nods in agreement. She turns to Jenan. “Are you going to say yes this time? You’d be crazy to say no!”

Jenan hesitates again. “Maybe” she says, rubbing her forearm. “I’m not ready to leave my family.”

“Oh! Ballahi!” Khalto Laila shouted. She laughed. “Yakhtee, everyone must separate from their family sometime. You don’t want to be living with your mother and father for the rest of your life do you? You and your husband must be too nice to this girl,” she says to Mama. She chuckles.

“Be excited! You’ll be a bride soon!” she says to Jenan.
Jenan smiles a sly smile, but it disappears as soon as Khalto Laila turns her head. Khalto Laila gets up from her chair and walks to the bathroom.

Mama looks at Jenan. “Well? What do you think? Do you want to get married this time around?” Mama says.

Jenan shrugs.

“Stop, Jenan. You can’t keep pushing away marriage. You know that you’ve said no too many times now. You have to give this one a fair chance.”

“Why do you all fancy yourselves matchmakers?” Jenan asks her mother.

“We’re not asking you to marry him yet. We’re simply asking you to give him a chance. To meet him. You will never know if this is right for you until you meet him. If you don’t, I promise you, you will regret it when you’re older,” Mama says.

Jenan is quiet.

“I’m going to tell your father about this. They’ll come over and you can meet him. Then you can make a decision about whether you want this or not. How does that sound?”

“If I decide I don’t want this after I meet him, you won’t get mad? And I won’t have to marry him?”

“Yes. All we’re asking is that you meet with him.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Jenan nods.
Jenan had been turning down many proposals before this one. But their parents easily accepted her excuses those times. Since Jenan had still been young, they had not put much pressure on her, and her excuses were fair. Too ugly, too old, too fat, a bad family, a bad attitude. Their parents understood these excuses, and had understood that she was young. But now that she is in her twenties and since Ameena has married before her, they seem to feel that time is running out for Jenan. It is beginning to irritate Baba. He has been making sarcastic comments when the subject of their other female cousin’s engagements have come up.

Well at least she said yes. Unlike you, always saying no. Who’s going to care of you, Jenan? Your brothers? I wont be alive forever, he had said.

Khalto returns from the bathroom and begins telling Mama everything she knows about Saif and his family. They are filthy rich. They have carpentering businesses in Jordan. Their daughters have married doctors. Jenan gets up from her chair. “I’m going to pray thuhr,” she says.

“Yes, pray habeebty. Pray for blessings,” Mama says.

Jenan walks out of the family room and to the direction of her bedroom. Ameena follows her after she leaves the kitchen, so that she will not see her. Mama and Khalto Laila continue chattering and gossiping about the excitement of Saif Hamdan’s marriage proposal. Ameena walks carefully and slowly towards Jenan’s bedroom. She makes sure not to let her footsteps be heard. Jenan’s door is slightly ajar. Ameena can see in through a sliver of an opening. Jenan’s back is facing her when she peaks in, so Ameena watches her lay out her prayer carpet and begin praying.
“In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful…” she says.

Ameena can barely hear her because she is whispering, but just loud enough. Jenan always whispers loudly when she prays, most likely to shun out all distractions and keep her focus during prayer. After Jenan finishes the required number of raq’as, she prays more. Ameena looses record of how many. She starts to grow bored, standing there spying on Jenan in the hallway. Then, Jenan salems and holds out her open palms. She bows her head, reciting her prayers, over and over. They become more and more desperate.

“O Lord, it is your mercy that I have hope in, so do not leave me to myself even for the blink of an eye, and make my affairs good, all of them, for there is no God but You.”

Ameena feels pity for Jenan as she watches her there, desperate and upset. She understands that marriage can be scary, but Ameena thinks that Jenan lacks courage. She wants to know why it bothers Jenan so much. What is Jenan not telling her? Jenan has finally become quiet, so Ameena decides to talk to her and enters her bedroom. Jenan looks at her then, the worry clear in her face. There is a book on top of the rug in front of her, and she holds a pen in her hand. She closes it.

“What are you doing?” Ameena asks her.

“Nothing.” Jenan looks up at her, then down again. Her lips part, but then close.

“What’s that?”

“It’s just a book.”

“You were writing in it.”
“I was writing notes.”

The book is brown and has a hard cover with gold corners. It is typical for Jenan to be reading, but Ameena thinks she is being odd.

“How are you sad? You’ll get to have your own house and everything you want. Isn’t that something to be happy about?” It is strange for Ameena to be this comforting to Jenan. She is not usually this way to her.

Jenan nods.

“Well then why aren’t you happy? He’s a very good looking guy, remember? We’ve both seen him before.”

“I’m afraid. I don’t even know him.”

Ameena understands. She is lucky to have married someone of her liking, even though Kareem is gone now. And because he is the son of a close friend of Baba’s, he was more accessible. If she had her eye on someone from a family that her parents did not approve of, they would surely not have allowed it.

“Of course it’s scary, but every girl does it. Make it fun. Be more interested,” Ameena says.

Jenan nods.

“It is half the deen, you know. You of all people should know that you have to get married.”

Jenan nods again.

Ameena does not know what else to say.
“Don’t be afraid. There really isn’t much you can do about it, anyway. We all have to get married, and we don’t have many options unless we’re lucky. And really Jenan, this is your best option. You won’t find better than him. I promise you. Can you think of anyone better than him in this town?”

Jenan shakes her head.

“Exactly. So embrace it. It’s something to be proud of.”

Ameena feels that Jenan is being an idiot. She does not know why she is encouraging Jenan to marry. If Jenan marries, it will force Ameena to remember her loss, and Jenan will have all that Ameena lost. She should want happiness for Jenan. She is doing the right thing for once. A good deed, which she needs. Perhaps God will reward her. Bring Kareem back to her.

“I don’t want to leave here and live with people I don’t know. Just the thought of it is unnerving to me.”

Often times, Jenan sounds very smart when she speaks. Sometimes Ameena admires it, and others times it irritates her. It irritates her now. Ameena can see that Jenan fears marriage, but she does not understand why Jenan is unable to overcome her fear. It is something every woman must do.

“But you would be such a good wife, you do everything perfectly, so why does it bother you this much?” she asks.

Jenan shrugs.
“Why is it so easy for other girls to marry whoever they are arranged with? And they always swear that they’re happy at the end of it all. They say: ‘My husband was my naseeb.’ I don’t know why I can’t do it too,” Jenan says.

“Because you’re being weak, that’s why. Just face it, be strong. Don’t you want to have babies? You love babies.”

Jenan nods.

“Tayeb,” Ameena says. “You can finally have a baby.”

“I just can’t bear moving away and living with other people. A mother in law. They can be so demanding.”

Honestly, Jenan. There’s got to be some reason why you’re rejecting this man. I don’t understand.” Ameena sighs and leaves the room.

She does not know what Jenan is keeping from her, but she knows there is something she is not telling her.
Chapter 4:
The Olive Tree

When Jenan and Ameena were children, they lay under a solitary olive tree at the edge of their yard in a summer’s sunset. They both called it their tree. They were not unfamiliar to the outdoors, because that was where they became accustomed to life. And when they grew bored, they climbed to the top of their tree and pelted unripened olives at passersby. They hid there until someone walked by. Ameena threw them with all her might, though her aim was terrible compared to Jenan’s. Ameena often missed the people she aimed for, and they went on their business without ever noticing any unripened olives. But she did not stop when she failed. And though Jenan hardly ever did anything wrong, Ameena always somehow managed to persuade her to carry out her tasks for her, the mischievous ones too.

But they’re minding their own business, Ameena. How would you like it if someone did that to you? Jenan said once.

Ameena still does not know why Jenan listened to her. Perhaps it was because Jenan loved her, and because Ameena was her dearest friend; or maybe, because Jenan admired Ameena. Jenan would throw back her arm, bring it forward, then back again before pelting it. Most times, they hit their father’s employees. The employees hardly ever saw where the olives had come from, and simply went on their way. Once, Jenan hit Hatim straight in the forehead. He was their father’s idiot employee. He flinched like a
crazy man, rubbed his forehead, and looked around. When he heard their giggling coming from their tree, he marched right up to it, and found them high between the boughs.

Ho there! I swear to tell your father! He said. He was a meager of a man, and the easiest to pick on.

Baba’s employees hardly ever told, because they feared Baba, and feared to disturb him. He is a frightening man when offended, and is always easily offended. He intimidated them, as he did everyone else that met him. To Ameena and her siblings, Baba is like the school principle.

Ameena and Jenan were incredibly surprised that it had been measly old Hatim who came up with the gumpion to finally tattle; they had hit him plenty of times before. He must have been very angry that day, most likely for the reason that Ameena hit him hard, straight in the forehead. This was one of the few times in which she had hit a target. Jenan and Ameena were both exposed to Baba’s wrath.

Which one of you hayawanaat threw it? Baba shouted.

Jenan quickly admitted that she had thrown the olive. It was clear to Ameena that Jenan was often unsuccessful at lying. Ameena did not speak up either.

Ya hayawana! He shouted. If I ever hear about you hitting anyone again, I’ll cut off your hand myself! Insirfu!

But his threats were always empty, because he never actually hit them. He simply had to shout at them furiously for what felt like an eternity, with a look on his face that reminded them of death. This is all it ever took him to get them to be obedient. And Jenan never told that it was Ameena who had begged her to throw those olives.
Baba did not release any of his rage on dumb old Hatim. In fact, he apologized to him for their behavior and respectfully let him know that he would see to their punishment. They learned quickly that for all the mishappenings that involved any of them, Baba would surely figure out how they were to blame for every problem.

It’s because you didn’t study hard enough, he would say to Ameena when her teachers gave her unfair grades. And when their brother Hesham had been in a car accident, and his car had been struck, Baba released a true fury.

I told you not to leave the house at night! He said, and cursed him in Arabic. Though they all remember clearly that he had, in fact, given Hesham permission to leave the house.

*Ya Hesham, inta ihmar!* He said, voice straining at his attempt to shout as loud as he possibly could.

Get out! His eyes bulged, his neck outstretched, and his arms were thrown around in motion.

Once a small matter angered Baba, he had a difficult time forgetting it, and would lament and complain about it for another week, or longer. Often times, he brought up incidents that offended him months and years after they occurred, reminding them of what he perceived as their own ignorance. And once one of them had unintentionally offended him, he turned against all of them, called them all betrayers, and brought up the previous offenses of each member of the family.

I have terrible children, he said once to their visitors, who insisted that they were admirable children, but he quickly dismissed their words before they could finish them.
I worked hard, handed them over this luxurious life, and, in return, they give me their stupidity.

He was always firm in his own opinions, whether they were on the matters of culture, religion, or politics. No visitors, family members, or friends could convince him otherwise. Once he had created an assumption about anything, especially his family, he believed firmly in it, as if it were his newly revealed faith, his absolute truth. He resisted any reasoning otherwise, whether the assumption was true or not. Even when they tried to correct his assumptions with the truth, he refused to believe them.

Liars, he would say. You all defend each other to make me think I’m a mad man. And the older they grew, the harsher and firmer his assumptions.

Even his own siblings dislike him, Hesham once whispered to Ameena as Baba was throwing a fit down the stairs. Ameena thinks it was over a bill of some sort.

But despite his temper, Baba was not always angry, and when he was in good spirits, he took them on picnics and on hikes through their lands. He told them jokes and encouraged them to study hard, so that they could create successful careers for themselves. Often times, his conversation ended in reprimanding lectures, but these were outweighed by their appreciation for his rare lack of outbursts. Sometimes they went to the movies, or out to the markets together, and he bought them new clothes and books. He is a good father, and they appreciate him very much, though they never make it apparent. Ameena thinks they each fear showing him affection, because of his natural sternness.
Ameena and Jenan spent all of their time together when they were children. And after a long day of playing in the dunams, they would lay together under their tree.

This is the tree I’m taking with me to heaven, Jenan said to her. It’ll be my tree up there like it is now.

Who cares about a silly old tree? In heaven there will be greater things, Ameena said.

It’s the tree God gave me to rest under. And I’m taking it with me.

Ameena thought Jenan was crazy, and said so aloud. You can’t take a tree with you to heaven, stupid.

You can do anything you want to in heaven.

They spoke until they fell asleep. It was often they spent their sunsets under there, a short distance from their family complex. They loved to watch the colors change in the sky.

Their home felt like a palace, even more so when Ameena was a child. It has many windows and is two stories high, with elevated ceilings of nearly twenty feet, latticed balconies and filigree iron gates. There is a large round balcony that stretches across the second level—the most visible part of the house, from which she can see almost all of Nablus. Mama caught them a number of times on this balcony with sheets tied to their waists, and spanked them for stealing the sheets from the laundry lines. They imagined themselves royalty, waving at passersby. Ameena had persuaded Jenan into taking the sheets.
If ever Ameena asked Jenan of something, Jenan was sure to deliver, even the few times she was hesitant. It was clear to Ameena that Jenan always felt guilty the times she attempted to turned her down. She would look at her after rejecting her ideas, and say:

Oh fine. But you know you wouldn’t do the same for me. Ameena disagreed with her.

In front of their house is a garden that had two stone pathways running parallel from each other, with trees of different shades of green and flowers all along them.

This is my heaven! Jenan said excitedly to her once.

Ameena laughed at her and told her she was strange, because it was a sentimental thing to say, and Ameena has always been uncomfortable with sentimentality. Or perhaps it is only with Jenan; she is too loving, too happy. She always laughs at things that others do not find funny, or smiles at someone who speaks matter of factly. As for the times she is sad, it cannot be hidden from her eyes. And if she ever speaks to others about her sadness, she smiles through her words. Indeed, it is hard to tolerate her affection, especially when Ameena is agitated about something. The only person Ameena enjoys sharing sentimental moments with is Kareem.

*

Mama comes into the garden where Ameena and Jenan are sitting, right outside of the kitchen.

“I spoke with Baba,” she says to Jenan. “And he agreed to let them come over and see you. Alright?” Mama says.
Jenan looks at the grass for a moment. There is a look of compliance in her facial expression.

“Okay,” she says.

“I’m going to call Laila now and tell her to let them know that they are welcome to come over.”

Jenan nods.

Mama walks into the kitchen where the telephone is. It is in the kitchen because that is where Mama spends most of her time, talking on the phone and gossiping as she cooks.

She dials Khalto Laila’s number. The window is open so they can hear her speaking.

“Laila, what are you doing?” they hear Mama say from Jenan’s bedroom.

“They can talk to Umm Saif now.”

She is laughing and enjoying the conversation but Jenan is not. She sits there dispirited, looking into space.

*

Ameena is walking in the garden. She remembers the brown book Jenan was writing in. She had closed it when Ameena walked in. Jenan’s behavior had been strange when she had spoken to her.

A journal. It must be. Ameena wants to know what is bothering Jenan, why she is acting strangely about the proposal. Ameena looks over and sees that Jenan is feeding the goats. It is the perfect opportunity for Ameena to look for it. She runs back into the
Ameena opens Jenan’s clothing cabinets and reaches to the top. She feels nothing. Jenan’s clothes are hung up so neatly that the book is visibly nowhere in between them. She closes the cabinet and goes through the drawers. The clothes are very neatly folded so Ameena is careful not to untidy them. There is no brown book hidden in between any of them. Ameena knows it has to be in her room, because there is not another safe place for Jenan to keep it in the house. And it must to be somewhere where Jenan has easy access to it. She must be writing in it at night while they are all asleep, because until Ameena had walked into Jenan’s bedroom and seen it, she had not known it existed. This leads her back to Jenan’s bed, and her nightstand. Ameena shoves her arm underneath it, because she knows Jenan would never keep it in the top drawer where anyone could find it.

Ameena feels it. The brown leather, the hard gold corners. She slips it out from underneath. It makes sense that Jenan is keeping a journal. She is a very private person, and never speaks to anyone about her personal life. She has to release her thoughts somehow. Ameena sits on her knees and opens it to the first page.

* It is April and Jenan is sweeping the stone floors. She swings her arms back and forth across the ground. Her broom does not have a stick and she must use her arms. The house, and walks swiftly into Jenan’s bedroom. She looks through her books, and sees that none of them are brown. Journals are kept hidden, so she looks under the bed, and under her pillow. It is not there. She lifts her mattress. It is not there either. Jenan is smarter than Ameena thought.
dust collects into a pile, that she will eventually sweep into a tray and dump into the yard. She does this every morning after feeding the goats. It is the part where she always fails. She never can quite collect all the dust, because there are always the motes that fly back onto the surface and settle. She wonders why she can never collect them all. Why can’t she get rid of all of the dust? Only God knows. Along with her mother, she will scrub these floors rigorously. It is laborious work, taking care of their home, but her body will adjust after the work is done and she has slept.

She does not think much of this life, but she is at peace and she is grateful for that. There is hardly any excitement found in her days, only the mundane and the usual. With age and wisdom she has come to accept the raw realism of her life. To learn that she will rarely find the fruitful enjoyment she used to dream of when she was still fresh to the world. Still, she appreciates the peace, relishes it—the fresh breezes of the spring air, the scent of the orange blossoms permeating from her fields. By the age of twenty she found that the excitement in her life had passed long before she got the chance to live out her dreams. Even when her life was going well, she did not feel the euphoria she wished to experience. She has been bored for a long time now, incredibly bored. But she keeps reminding herself that she is destined for heaven, where that feeling she bases her life on can surely be found.

When she learned about heaven as a child, she was told that in heaven, everything she ever wanted would be given to her, and these gifts would come without limitation and without end. Islam taught her that the beauty of heaven and God are so great, that their existence is incomprehensible to the simple human imagination, and that only once one is
in heaven can they awe at its greatness. This thought attracted her as she grew older and more bored of her life. It has filled the void in her emptiness. She knew that heaven would be her true time of happiness, so she made an agreement with herself to live her life for it.

Everyday, she wakes up at fajr, prepares breakfast for her family, feeds the goats, sweeps the floors, milks the goats and prays thuhr. After this she helps her father and her brothers pick ripened fruits and vegetables from their land. Then, she begins cooking dinner with her mother, she prays asr, and then she sits to read Quran for a half hour, while occasionally checking on dinner, cutting vegetables here and there, throwing in spices, stirring. After dinner is ready, she prays maghrib with her family, and then they eat. And after the dishes have been cleaned and the floors have been washed and dried and the all utensils have been put away, she prays isha, thanks Allah for her bed, and sleeps.

She wonders what other types of life abound in the great world of God. She does not know. She only knows the life she has. But she does know of heaven. Yes, there will still be heaven. And she will wait for it.

***

Jenan is washing the dishes. Khalto Laila has come to visit them at this hour of the day, after they have prayed thurh. Mama notices her along the dirt road and shouts to her from the window.
“Welkum! Hey!” Khalto Laila says from the other side, knocking continuously. Mama frets for them to answer the door. Jenan stops washing and runs to answer the door. Khalto Laila stands there with an irritated look on her face.


“Wel! Shu ida’wa! What took you so long? I have good news for you yakhtee! Where is your mother?” she asks while entering.

Jenan tells Khalto Laila that Mama will be down in a minute. Jenan wonders what gossip Khalto Laila will bring today. Jenan sets a pot of water on the stove for tea. Mama comes down the marble stairs shortly after, out of breath and excited. They sit at the kitchen table. Khalto Laila asks about Ameena, how she is doing. Then she turns to Jenan as she sits quietly beside Mama.

“And why has your younger sister married before you, Jenan? Do you not wish to marry?” Khalto Laila asks her.

Jenan never knows how to answer this question masterfully. It always seems to catch her off her guard. To create an instant wrenching fear. It always takes her a minute to compose herself and then, she tells them what they want to hear. She knows she will have to marry eventually, but she is so thankful that a suitor has not come for her, so very thankful. She is grateful that she is not as beautiful as her sister, grateful that she still has time to live without a husband. She wants never to marry. She knows her mother and father expect it from her. All of Nablus will expect it from her. She fears the day a husband will come for her, dreads it more than anything, because she knows with certainty that her father will approve, that her mother will approve, that her father will
give her away. She knows that she will have no choice, that her mother and father will not tolerate a rebellion, and that she will be entombed with no other alternative. She does not want to live with a husband and his mother, or his family. She knows they will want her to cook and to clean, and to do so extraordinarily. To know when to speak and what to say, and when not to. She will not be able to be what they want. They will scorn her and they will hate her. They will tell her she is unworthy and useless. That she is an incapable idiot.

She knows every girl in Nablus can do this except for her. Each girl will marry, will be a wife and birth children. They will do it buoyantly and they will succeed. She wonders why they are unafraid, while she is terrified. Why is it the fulfillment of their lives, but not hers? She would love a child, but must she marry a man to have one? She fears men—almost despises them. She knows of men and their desires. She knows of their physicality and of the austere powers they impose. She knows of their harsh tongues and betrayals. She has never known a truly honest man, not even the seemingly harmless ones. There is no telling what a man will do, what his true intentions are. She cannot trust that he will be kind to her. She has heard enough stories from married women. She has seen the way her mother is always blamed by her father. She wishes not to follow the patterns of their lives, the pattern that perpetually awaits her. Even though marriage is an obligation for each Muslim, she is so eager to evade it. She will not be able to bear a life of provisional surroundings—of failure. She does not want to live a life like her mother, a life of submission to her father, a life of servitude, of invective harassment. She wants to go and to leave Nablus behind, to break from the strictures. But she knows as certain as
sight that only through death can she escape. So she will wait for death, and she will wait for heaven.

“Only time will tell, Khalto. Everything is destiny,” she replies.

She likes to think of the present moments of her life as peaceful, and she loves peace dearly. Peaceful until the horrors that await her finally materialize. She will cherish this peace, until that day comes. Until that man comes.

“Well it seems a man has taken an interest in you, and they’ve asked me to speak with your parents. Are you not excited?” asks Khalto Laila.

Jenan is not the least bit excited—she is stunned. She cannot display the derangement she is feeling on her face.

“Why shouldn’t I be excited?” Jenan says. It is not on her face, but it is deep in her chest—the panic that is pervading her body. She must remain stoical. If she marries this man, she will be perpetually confined by him. She must face the worst now. Marriage—the potent marker of her life. She must be brave and she must accept this destiny. God has willed it. But she can’t. She can’t. She will pray.

She will pray and she will pray boundlessly. God will help her, she believes. God will guide her.

“And who is this man, Laila?” her mother inquires.

“Saif Hamdan. The son of Sufyan Hamdan from the Thabata family. They are a fine family, just like your husband’s and mine. And he is a handsome boy, he is. They will be a fair match, he and your daughter.”
“Well this is fine news, Laila. Has his father spoken about this with my husband yet? He will surely approve.”

“No, but he will now that I have gotten your blessings. I will tell Umm Saif, and she will tell her husband, and they will come and ask for Jenan in no time.”

What can she do now but pray? He is reputedly a good man, they say. But she cannot trust this. She rises abruptly from the floor.

“I am going to pray thuhr,” she says, excusing herself.

“Yes, pray my darling, pray,” says Mama.

She walks out of the family room and into the bedroom. She wants to shed teardrops, to alleviate the pain, but the panic is more overwhelming. She lays out her carpet and begins praying.

“In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful…” she starts. She bows her head to God, reciting desperately her prayers. After she finishes the required number of raqas, she prays more. She is not keeping record of how many—she just keeps praying, keeps worshipping. When she finishes, she sits on her knees and she speaks to God.

“O Lord, it is your mercy that I have hope in, so do not leave me to myself even for the blink of an eye, and make my affairs good, all of them, for there is no God but You.”

*

Ameena hears footsteps. She closes the brown book. She had been right. It is a journal.
Chapter 5:
Rasmiya’s Words

It is a hot afternoon at their family complex. Jenan is cooking dinner in the kitchen, while Mama and Ameena gather the laundry from the laundry lines.

It is strange for Ameena to find herself helping. At times, she likes to help Mama, when Mama is not asking for it. Sometimes, Ameena takes charge and tells Jenan to do some chores while she does the others. Mama is always pleased when Ameena helps, and is not pleased when she does not. With Jenan Mama is neither. Mama is used to Jenan’s constant assistance.

In the fields, all of the able men work, while the children play. It is a beautiful day, and weeks have passed since Kareem’s arrest.

Ameena wants desperately to see him again, his face. To see him standing in front of her, in the fields, anywhere.

The sun is out, and it is not too warm. After Ameena and her mother finish the laundry, Ameena sits outside of their house on the back porch. There is a breeze and she takes advantage of the quiet. She thinks. She wonders how the world can be so beautiful at a time when she has lost everything. She knows it is beautiful, but she cannot see it.

Their family complex is near the mountains, and that is what she can see. Those mountains that she had always wished she could gaze beyond. She wonders what lay behind them. They rest where her domain ends. When she was a child, she felt as though they protected them from invaders. They would keep the Jews out.
Her uncle’s houses surround her father’s. On the left side of her father’s home is a produce field, and on the right is the olive and citrus groves. Behind all of this are acres of wheat fields thriving out of their desert lands that Ameena and Jenan had sprinted across for what seemed like years, until they would reach those mountains, the barrier that rose so high beyond their heads. But those mountains could not protect her from falling in love, and she sits there missing her new husband.

Ameena has no idea where to start after the lawyer failed to help her. Who can help her now? Who else has been through this?...

Rasmiya Ramadan. She is one of the many other women whose husbands, sons, brothers, uncles had been arrested. Those women can help her. She has forgotten them all, forgotten the many that understand her suffering. Yes, they’ll know what to do! She feels energy. Some hope. She decides to visit Rasmiya in the balad, the one she knows better than the rest of them. She jumps from her seat and runs into the kitchen. She tells Mama that she is going to visit her and that she will be back soon.

“Don’t go alone!” Mama says. “People will talk. Let Hesham walk you.”

The irritation rises in Ameena. She knew Mama would say this, but she is in a rush. She needs to talk to Rasmiya immediately. She needs relief. But Mama rarely allows her to go anywhere alone, and the balad is a place of gossip. It is the hill that some of town’s people live on, that rises up on the eastern part of town. Men sit outside of their shops, and watch for passerby. Young girls are not to be up there unescorted. But Ameena does not care. She will cover herself modestly and no men will look at her. She will slip by them unnoticed.
“Just let me go alone, Mama. They wont see me, I’ll be careful. I’ll cover myself all over.”

“*Bala hebel.* It doesn’t matter, they’ll still talk!”

“Who cares if they talk?”

“Go into the fields now and get your brother to take you.”

“Mama!”

“Go!”

“This is ridiculous, I can get there alone!”

“You know your father will kill me if I let you go alone. He’ll kill you too!”

Ameena huffs and marches out to the fields. She reaches Hesham.

“Will you take me to my friend Rasmia’s house? Please?”

Hesham pauses. “All the way in the balad? Right now?”

“I just want to ask her about her husbands arrest. I need her help. Please. You know I’d go alone if I could.”

He sighs. He nods.

“Let’s go,” he says, and they walk.

“You wants Rasmia’s help to find Kareem?” He asks

She nods. “Her husband was arrested a few years ago. Maybe she can tell me what to do.”

“She probably can’t help you, Ameena. She’ll tell you what everyone else has been telling you.”
Ameena is tired of hearing that there is nothing she can do, and the irritation continues to rise in her.

“It doesn’t hurt to try. Besides, I want to visit her.”

“Don’t waste your time. Do you really think she could do anything about her husbands arrest?”

Ameena sighs. “Look, I’m just visiting a friend alright? Never mind everything else I said.”

“Alright,” he says. “One thing she can give you is comfort.”

They pass many people but Ameena does not pay them attention the way she normally does. She looks at faces and the traces on them. She finds scars. She finds small details. But not today.

They have walked a mile and have finally reached Rasmiya’s house. At the door Hesham tells Ameena to call the house when she wants to leave, and that he will come back for her.

Rasmiya smiles when she answers the door. Ameena smiles back. She feels Rasmiya’s comfort immediately. There is someone who understands her pain.

“Look who’s come to visit me! How are you? Come inside.”

“I’m good, how are you?” She walks in and looks around. The walls are stone and unpainted. Rasmiya’s place is much different than her own. They had gone to school together, but Rasmiya was four years older than Ameena, and had been in the eleventh grade when Ameena had been in the eighth. All of the girls in their school knew each other well, because there were no more than two hundred of them. What Ameena
remembers most about Rasmiya is that she had taught Ameena how to braid her hair properly, and how to wear makeup. Ameena had hated how she looked in the eighth grade, and Rasmiya had helped her with her appearance.

“I’m good, Alhamdulilah. Come sit.” Rasmiya waves her hand. “I’ll get you a glass of aseer.” Ameena sits on her couch and looks at it. It is dingy and the pink floral pattern is fading. It has plenty of brown stains and tares. Rasmiya has been married for a few years now, and has two children.

Rasmiya brings her a glass of red aseer and sits next to her.

“I’m sorry about Kareem. Have you heard anything about him yet?”

“No. That’s why I came to see you. Tell me what I should do.”

Rasmiya sighs and has a disappointed look on her face.

“What happened with your husband? How long did it take? Tell me,” Ameena says.

“Well, they came to our house looking for him, and they took him. I didn’t see him or hear from him for two years.”

Two years. Ameena cannot bear two years. There is a sinking within her.

“How did you get him back?” she asks.

Rasmiya has a sorry look on her face. “I couldn’t do anything. I had to wait for them to release him.”

“Nothing?”

Rasmiya shakes her head.
“I did not see him or hear from until they released him. When they were releasing him, that is when he called.”

Ameena nods.

“There was no trial and they never told us where they were keeping him.”

Ameena weeps. Rasmiya takes her in her arms and hushes her.

“Don’t be hopeless. Every case can be different. There’s always a chance. Some boys get released much faster than others,” Rasmiya says.

But Ameena continues crying. Rasmiya’s words have struck her. She understands now that there is, in reality, not a thing that she can do.

*

Ameena returns home from Rasmiya’s. She walks into the kitchen. Mama calls Jenan down to mop the first floor. Ameena never participates in the mopping. Jenan appears shortly after with an expression that says she is not excited about the mopping. Ameena knows what Jenan is thinking: that Mama is taking advantage of her obedience. Jenan has confessed this to Ameena before.

Mama manipulates me because I listen to her. She takes advantage of me, because the rest of you don’t listen to her the way I do, Jenan had said.

Oh, you just hate Mama, Ameena said. You always think badly of her. She’s a great mother and you try to tarnish her image.

This bothered Jenan. I would never try to tarnish her image, she said.

Jenan had told Ameena how she resented Mama, but Ameena can’t recall when. Jenan hated the way Mama gave her disgusted looks when Jenan said something that
Mama did not approve of. She said Mama knew how to make her feel like a strange, stupid person, like when Jenan said she would never marry. And when Jenan was fatigued with depression over the thought of having to marry soon, Mama’s look of disgust scarred Jenan’s memory. One thing they both never agreed about with Mama was the topic of marriage. Ameena contested her about it often, even though Mama refused to reconsider her opinions. Mama made her opinions clear to them.

There is no such thing as love in a marriage. That is all fairy tale nonsense. There is only tolerance of the person you marry, Mama had said.

Mama has a nosy personality, but Ameena loves her nonetheless. She sees always how kind Mama is to others, how she helps everyone and is always friendly, even though she is less compassionate to Ameena and her siblings. Often times Mama grew uncomfortable when Ameena hugged her and told her how much she loved her.

Alright, she would say, patting Ameena and wanting to laugh and get away at the same time. When it came to Ameena and her siblings, Mama was all about rules, and propriety. And the most dangerous thing Ameena and Jenan can do is be seen with a man they are not married to.

There is no forgiveness for women, she said. She never grew tired of reminding them this.

It seemed Mama always expected them to marry an older man the way she did. They are mature and stable, she argued.

Jenan believes that Mama married their much older father out of propriety, that their grandmother and grandfather must have persuaded her to marry a wealthy man. But
this, Mama denied as well. She always insisted that no one had persuaded her to marry. That she chose to marry on her own.

But Baba has always been a temperamental man. One thing Ameena has always admired about her mother, but never understands, is how she never lets him keep her spirits down. He curses at Mama each time he is angry, calls her a *sharmoota*, hundreds of times—she, the most chaste woman Ameena knows—and still it never seems to upset her. None of them are forced to face his wrath the way Mama is. For every problem the family encounters, he blames Mama. He says she is incapable of raising decent children, and refuses to let her speak or explain herself, though she apologizes incessantly.

Shut your mouth! he says.

And when she ignores this and continues to speak, he shouts: Go to your father’s house!

For this reason, Ameena vows never to marry an older, explosive man like her father. And after he flees the house in a rage, Mama goes about her day as though she never heard his biting words, laughing and joking with her sister in laws.

Oh, he’ll forget about it soon, she tells Ameena and Jenan. But the strangest part about her mother and father’s relationship is that Mama defends him, despite how unkind he can be to her.

He doesn’t love us! Ameena shouted once. He must have yelled at Ameena about school or Quran lessons.

Don’t you say such a stupid thing! Mama said. He loves you all!

He is completely unaffectionate, Ameena said.
That’s not true at all. He is very affectionate, if only you all would show him some affection and appreciation.

Ameena wondered if her mother has been in denial about his constant lack of amity, in denial that he is a contentious man, in denial that her marriage is an unhappy one. Ameena cannot see how he makes her happy, though Mama always insists that he does.

Be kind to him, she said. His father never showed him love, so he doesn’t know how to initiate affection.

He’s angry all the time, Ameena said.

She is the one who speaks out against him most. She speaks on behalf of herself and her siblings, because he seems to bother her more than he bothers them. They tolerate him more than Ameena does, and get over his fits faster than her.

He’s angry because you all don’t appreciate him or sit with him, or even talk to him, Mama said.

That’s because he’s angry all the time and we don’t want to be around him! Ameena said.

No other father in all of Nablus has given his children as much as your father has given all of you, Mama told them. And she was right. He had been a good father. He cared about their education, and he bought them things that other fathers did not buy their children, like books and school supplies. And despite his constant temper, there were still those moments when he was actually cheerful and happy around them. He would make jokes and laugh at his own jokes, and sometimes he was even more ridiculous than them.
when it came to humor. He would randomly shout something silly that had nothing to do with what they were talking about. Once, when Mama was cooking dinner, she asked Jenan to hand her the pumpkin seeds that were next to the chicken, and Baba, who had been immersed in a film on television, randomly replied in a shout,

    Chicken seeds?

    He said it solely to be silly. They laughed always when he was in a humorous mood. They appreciated his lack of anger and encouraged his happiness so that his temper would not return.

    Jenan told Ameena once that she is convinced that Mama must have a certain kind of attraction towards aggressors, and that this is precisely why she respects Baba, Hesham and Ameena.

    You all shout at her when she tells you what to do, and then she lets you all do as you please, Jenan said.

    Ameena still does not understand why Jenan makes so many judgments about Mama (though Ameena will admit to being the queen of judgments). She thinks it unkind of Jenan, since Mama is always bragging about Jenan to her friends, so often that it irritates Ameena when she hears it. Jenan is at the top of her class, Jenan completed the Qur'an, Jenan can cook anything.

    The only thing Jenan has not accomplished is getting married. Perhaps Jenan is right about Mama commanding her assistance around the house, often shouting to her from the kitchen to clean such and such, but that gives Jenan no reason to judge Mama all
the time. Jenan is such a sensitive person, that whenever any of them ask her for favors, she thinks they are all taking advantage of her because she is nice.

Whenever I ask you for something, you say no, she said to Ameena. Which Ameena knew was *partially* true, but no one told Jenan to be so nice, and no one ever *forced* her to say yes to their favors.

Mama never asks you to help around the house, because you never listen, Jenan said.

Islam says that heaven is at the feet of your mother, so of course, Jenan attempted not to break that rule either, even though sometimes she snapped at Mama too, and probably worried herself about it. She probably thought she might go to hell for it.

There is a knocking at the door. It is Khalto Laila again. They can hear her shouting outside the door.

“Hurry ladies! *Yallah!*” Khalto Laila says from the other side.

Mama gasps. “It’s Laila!” she says.

“Get the door girls! Fast! She’s going to get angry!” Mama says. Jenan drops her mop and scurries to the door to answer it.

“It’s about time! *Shu ida’wa?* You take so long to answer the door!” Khalto Laila says.

“Sorry Khalto,” Jenan says. Normally she laughs at Khalto’s temper, apologizing and making innocent excuses for why she did not answer the door immediately at Khalto’s arrival, but this time she does not. It must be because Khalto Laila could be bringing more news that Jenan does want to receive.

Khalto Laila laughs after Jenan, the irritation passing from her face.

“Come inside Laila!” Mama shouts from the hall.

“Leena! I have something to tell you!” Khalto Laila says.

Jenan blinks quickly. Ameena is sure that Jenan knows what Khalto Laila’s news has to do with. She must be scared. Very scared. Ameena bets her scared little heart is beating right through her chest. Jenan walks to the stove and turns her back to everyone. It seems she wants to hide her face. She has been acting strange since Khalto’s last visit. She has been distant and quiet. Sadder than Ameena, and she has not even met her suitor yet.

“What is it?” Mama says.

“Umm Saif and her son want to come on Sunday!”

“Well tell them ahlān wa saḥlan!”

“Alright, I will tell them on my way home.”

Jenan sighs. They begin gossiping again. A girl from the Thabata family had run off with a boy to Jordan. Jenan leaves the kitchen. When Khalto Laila leaves, Mama calls Jenan back into the kitchen to finish mopping the floor. Jenan begins scrubbing the floors, and scrubbing them hard.

“So they’re coming on Sunday then?” Jenan asks Mama.

“Yes. Jenan, they are coming on Sunday. Do you have a nice dress to wear?”

“I’ll figure something out.” She scrubs more. “Do I have to do this?”
Mama begins pulling out pots and pans. “The house will have to be clean and tidy.”

“I don’t think I want to do this, Mama,” Jenan says. She has that worried look on her face and in her eyes. When Jenan was sad, it could not be hidden from her eyes. Her entire face, her eyes, her mouth, her eyebrows lowered.

“For goodness sake, Jenan. It’s only a dinner. And we can’t tell them not to come over. Before, you didn’t give the other men a chance. You didn’t meet with them before you rejected their proposals. You can’t keep doing that. It’s bad for your future. You’re throwing away very good opportunities, and this one has been the best so far.”

Jenan is still scrubbing. She scrubs harder and harder…

She begins slowing down, more and more. She comes to a stop. She wipes away the soap and leaves the room.

Ameena still cannot understand her disinterest in the Hamdan boy. He is like the town’s prince charming. It is frustrating not knowing why Jenan is opposed to this proposal. Most girls in their town would be ecstatic to be receiving it. It seems their parents had been waiting for a man like him to ask for her. Now that he had finally arrived, they cannot conceive of a better suitor. A handsome, wealthy man. A concern to which Jenan will always be indifferent. Ameena does not understand why Jenan does not find simply the idea of it attractive.

Ameena knows that Jenan has gone to her bedroom, so Ameena follows her there. When she walks in, Jenan is dusting her dresser, quickly as if she has somewhere to go and she is running late.
“I think this marriage would be great for you, Jenan. I think, if you gave it a chance, you would be really happy,” Ameena says, braiding her own hair.

Jenan does not reply, and continues wiping.

Ameena is not one to tolerate being ignored. She sighs and begins walking out of her bedroom.

“I…” Jenan says. She huffs out a deep breath. “I’m scared. You knew your husband when you married him. I won’t know him until after I’m married to him. And what if I don’t like him? What if I \textit{can’t} fall in love with him? It won’t matter because I’ll be stuck with him forever.”

“But that won’t happen! You know we’ve been hearing only good things about him.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You have to stop being such a chicken about everything in life. Be strong and take your life into your hands. It’s as if someone is hanging a sack of gold in your face, and you’re refusing to take it.”

“It isn’t like that.”

“Really? This man will give you everything you’ve ever wanted. He’s as rich as they come. Handsome too, and he’s nice, but you complain every time they suggest someone for you. It’s getting pathetic at this point.”

Jenan does not answer.

“Don’t you want to be happy?”
“I want nothing from this world,” Jenan says in a low voice. She grabs a broom from the corner and begins sweeping.

Ameena looks at her with disgust.

“You are so strange,” she says.

Ameena hears Jenan take a deep breath as Ameena walks out of her room.

* 

Ameena is in the kitchen, drinking her afternoon tea. From the window, she can see that Jenan is feeding the goats again. Ameena runs straight to Jenan’s bedroom and pulls out her journal. She opens it. Ameena skims to the pages she had left off at.

* 

It has been one week since Khalto Laila’s visit. One week of misery and distress. Khalto Laila returns at this hour, just as Ameena is thinking of her last visit. She informs them that Saif and his mother are coming over this Sunday. Jenan can hardly accept more of this bad news. She has been dreading the day she will have to meet them. She is scrubbing the floors now, and scrubbing them arduously. There is a stubborn black stain on the floor that is unassailable and will not be erased. There is nothing she can do. She hasn’t a choice. She must be brave and marry just like all the other girls. After all, look at how happy her sister was with Kareem. Perhaps her husband will be a good man. Perhaps he will be kind and gentle and caring, like the prophet Muhammad, *salla Allahu ‘aleih wa sallam*. Perhaps. Perhaps she will be happy with Saif. She shudders. She cannot see it. Jenan is still scrubbing, scraping off a fraction of the black with every stroke, until her
limbs are sore and her hands go numb. She will accept this, she thinks. She will be strong. She scrubs harder and harder.

She begins slowing down, more and more. She comes to a stop. She wipes away the soap and leaves the rest of the stain on the tile. She walks away.

*

Jenan remembers the last conversation she had with Ameena.

There was never a time when Jenan was satisfied with the way she handled their squabbles. Never a time when she was the sayer laying it down for the listener. She was always the listener. The one that walked away always thinking of a better way to have said things. She had failed at every attempt to reason with Ameena, to impact her with words in the same way Ameena did to her. Jenan’s words were strong but they only slipped through Ameena, never having any effect because Ameena was always overwhelmed by her anger. Jenan might cut her open, but Ameena would never bleed. Ameena was the fighter. And Jenan was the watcher. The wonderer.

After their conversation, Jenan walks into the kitchen to eat. Ameena is already eating. Ameena’s eyes narrow. She picks up her bowl and walks past Jenan, whose eyes avoid connection. She walks straight to her mother who sits in the living room and sits next to her. Jenan watches. They begin to converse, but Jenan cannot hear them. She can only hear the beating in her chest. Not a single motion stirs in her face but the tears that well and flow.

*
Jenan reminisces alone under an olive tree in a clearing, about a mile from their home. Why must she face both the burden of having to marry Saif Hamdan and the coldness of her own sister? God, please help her bear this. It is so burdensome. Like the shift of a turning vehicle. Tears roll down her cheeks.

She remembers when she was twelve and Ameena was ten. They laughed together and played without quarrels and jealousies. But the memory she loves most is the time they fell asleep under that same olive tree, a simple solitary olive tree in a summer’s sunset. Their olive tree. Jenan pointed it out to her as they played in the grape vines to the rear of their home.

Do you see that tree over there Ameena?

Which tree?

That olive tree over in the clearing. The one all by itself.

What about it?

That’s the tree I’m taking with me to heaven. It’ll be my tree up there like it is now.

What do you want with a tree? In heaven there’ll be greater things. Who cares about a silly old tree?

It’s the tree God gave me to rest under. And I’m going to bring it with me.

You can’t take a tree with you to Heaven.

You can do anything you want to in Heaven, Jenan said, crawling out from under the grape vines. Let’s go out to that tree and play under it. It looks so alone.

Okay, Ameena said.
Ameena followed Jenan to the olive tree and they lay under it together, talking until they fell asleep. And there was a peace under that tree that is like no other.

Now she remembers the look Ameena gave her after Kareem’s mother had come over that night. She had wanted Jenan for him. She chose Jenan first.

Kareem is mine, Ameena said. He doesn’t care about you. Stay away from him.

But I don’t want him.

You’re a liar, a pretender.

Why would I lie about this? I could never do anything to hurt you!

You used me like a toy, like a doll. You’re selfish.

How? How have I used you?

You know what you did—prancing around his mother so she would notice you. And you wanted me around to make yourself look better.

Jenan does not want to remember this anymore and halts her mind to evade her memories. She is standing in the fields as the winds blow, praying that her thoughts will be carried away with them. She thinks of Saif Hamdan, his stern face, and the short time she has left to live without him. She must focus now on facing her parents but she is much too weak. She must concentrate hard and choose the words she will use carefully. What lies ahead of her is something she must face now. She is breathing, but she’s not really there. No, she is somewhere else, and she always has been.

*

Ameena closes Jenan’s journal.
She feels that Jenan is pathetic, weak. She does not feel sympathy for her. All that has happened to her is her own fault, because she is weak and she allows it.

It is two days before Jenan will have to meet Saif, and Ameena can see that Jenan is panicking. They sit on the couch in the family room. She can see that it is bothering Jenan more and more. She has stopped eating, and speaks little. When they laugh about things, she does not participate in the laughter, or, she forces out the faintest of a laugh and goes back to her silence.

“Look,” Mama says, pulling out a photograph. “Khalto Laila brought this over so you can see what he looks like.” She hands the photograph to Jenan. It is a picture of Saif.

“Where did she get this?” Jenan asks.

“From his mother when she talked to them. What do you think?”

Jenan looks at the photograph quietly for a moment.

“Isn’t he good looking?” Mama says.

“Sure, I guess.” Jenan says.

“He’s the best looking man in all of Nablus! Aren’t you excited?”

Mama had said that about all of Jenan’s suitors, until Ameena insisted on how hideous they were. This time though, Ameena cannot disagree. He is as attractive as Kareem.

“I don’t know. Sure,” Jenan replies. She pauses. She hands Mama back the photograph.
“Mama, this doesn’t feel right to me. I don’t think we should have this meeting at all,” she says.

“It’s too late, we’ve already made the plans, and we can’t tell them they can’t come over anymore. Besides, it will be exciting and fun! Look forward to it! It will be something happy to remember.”

“I don’t know. Can’t you postpone it for a while?”

“Are you crazy? They’re already coming over, so you don’t have a choice at this point. We can’t tell them not to come over just because you don’t feel like meeting him yet. That would be an embarrassment. They want to come over, so you have to meet him.”


Ameena grows tired of listening to Jenan’s whining and steps outside into the night to join Hesham on the baranda while he practices his wooden flute. The cool breeze caresses their skin. Hesham often played during nights like these. He can be good company at times. But Ameena loves him most for his humorous ways. Every day, he says the most ridiculous things and laughs out loud at himself. His laughs are like no one else’s. They sound something like a roar, and like they are coming from a much older, wheezing man. His voice is deeper than any man she knows, so naturally, so is his laughter.

He stops playing. It is quiet enough to hear the crickets. Ameena thinks he might know something, anything about when she might see Kareem again.

“What do they do to the boys in the prisons?” she asks him.
Hesham breaths out. “It’s better if you don’t ask these kinds of questions.”

“Why? What’s going to happen to him? Are they going to hurt or kill him?” She leans forward in her chair and turns to face him.

“They’re not going to kill him. You know these arrests happen all the time.”

“But they can if they want to. Are we not going to defend ourselves?” she says.

“What’s gotten into you? Arrests like these are nothing new. Juhoosh.”

“I just want my husband back.”

“There’s going to be a meeting tomorrow night at the kahwa nearby, and the mayor is coming.”

“A meeting,” she repeats. “Please Hesham, let me go with you to the meeting tomorrow.” She grips his arm. “I want to know what’s going on. Maybe we can find something out about Kareem. Maybe the mayor can help us. Could you ask him for me?”

“How am I going to bring you into a men’s meeting with me? There’s no way. You’d have to dress up like a man,” he says.

“Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“You’re serious?” he eyes her.

“Yes.”

Hesham smiles a sly smile. “You better be smart about how to keep this from Mama.” He goes back to his flute, and they embrace the coolness of the night.
It is the night that Saif has come to see Jenan. Saif and his mother are very nicely
dressed. Khalto Laila has come too. They watch from the banister, since Jenan was told
to wait upstairs until they call her down. Ameena is sure that Jenan is relieved by this.
She will have time to hide.

It is only he and his mother, because his father had passed away years earlier of a
heart attack, Khalto Laila had mentioned. Ameena thinks it would have been preferable
for the mother to be out of the picture. Mother in laws are always more irritating than
father in laws, because they feel like their son is being possessed by another woman
besides them, which is precisely why they always want to control everything about the
marriage when their son decides he wants to marry.

Mama, Baba and Hesham are being polite and welcoming them into their home.
Ameena can hear the kindness in their tones as they all chat. She cannot hear Saif much;
he only speaks when spoken to, it seems. After about twenty minutes, their parents send
Hesham up the stairs to bring Jenan down so they can meet her. He finds Ameena sitting
at the stair rails eavesdropping on them, and Jenan is in her room making dua.

“It’s time for you to come down,” he tells Jenan.
Jenan takes a deep breath and follows him down the stairs slowly. He is so fast that he has reached the bottom while she is only half way. She stops. He looks back and sees that she is so far behind him. He turns.

“What’s the hold up?” he says, confusion in his face.

“Just wait a minute.”

“What’s the matter with you? Why have you stopped? Come down.”

“Just wait, please. Give me a minute,” she whispers. I had never seen Jenan so nervous and terrified.

“Come on,” he says.

She slowly walks down the rest of the steps until she reaches the second to last step before the bottom. She stops again.

“Wait. I just need a minute,” she whispers again, but then begins sobbing.

Hesham is startled. “Shh! Quiet, don’t let them hear you.” He looks around.

“Pull yourself together. They’re just people. You’re only meeting people. They’re nothing.” He tells her as he grips her by the arms.

She nods and forces back her tears. He pulls her into a hug until she becomes quiet. Once she is quiet, he lets her go, and grabs a napkin from his pocket. He hands it to her. She wipes her tears.

“It’ll all be over in an hour or so,” he says, and takes her by the arm, walking her into the family room. Ameena can no longer see from where she is watching. She follows them down the stairs and listens from behind the wall. Ameena cannot understand why
Jenan is so afraid. Why can’t she just walk down the stairs and meet them? No one is going to harm her. It is a simple thing, meeting other people.

“Salmi Jenan!” Ameena hears Mama say. Mama always tells them to salem when meeting with others, even when they are already doing so.

Jenan walks over to Saif’s mother and shakes her hand, then she kisses both cheeks. His mother seems overjoyed by this. They all sit together and it is quiet for a while.

“I hear you have much of the Quran memorized, Jenan.” Saif’s mother asks. They all look at her to respond. She is not quick to reply.

“Jenan has half the Quran memorized. She practices every evening!” Mama says.

“Masha’ Allah! That is wonderful,” his mother says. “Saif has always been good at keeping up with his prayer and reading Quran. His father taught him.”

“What a perfect match then,” Mama says. The mothers giggle.

“And Jenan is such a thoughtful girl,” Mama says. “She helps me clean the house everyday. And she’s a great cook. She cooks more than I do!”

“What a balwa!” his mother says.

“How has your carpentering business been doing?” Baba asks Saif.

“Very well, Alhamdu lilah. My father was a very smart business man,” he says smiling. He has a voice that was deep but soft at the same time.

“So I’ve heard,” Baba chuckles. “He was a great carpenter. I remember him well, Allay Irhama.”
“He taught me everything I know, and left me with everything I need.”

“He was a good man.”

It is quiet again.

“Jenan, please bring us the tea,” Mama says, looking sternly at her and motioning for her to get up.

Jenan glares at Mama. She goes into the kitchen and does as told. Saif does not watch her as she walks to the kitchen. How unusual, Ameena thinks. Most men do not take their eyes off women. Jenan must be nervous. It must be difficult for her to make the tea, something that is easy for her on normal occasions.

When she gets to the kitchen, Jenan makes a face at Mama that says she does not want to make and serve the tea. Mama makes a face back at her. The ugly face she makes when she wants to assert herself. It is a frightening face, but once they were grown, it became so frightening that it was comical, and they laughed hysterically almost every time she made it, unless the situation was serious, the way it is now. Mama would tighten her lips as tight as possible, scrunch them up in the center of her face, and bulge her eyes as much as she could, so that she could show them that she was not willing to negotiate. As they always did when she made that face, Jenan does as told and begins making the tea.

Jenan must hate them all for putting her in this situation. Or perhaps she understands that it must be. Ameena feels sorry for Jenan, watching her discomfort. Ameena wishes that Jenan could be stronger. The water boils, and Jenan adds in the mint and the tea. She places four glasses on a tray and carries them slowly to the family room.
where they await her; Ameena can see the tray vibrating. Once Jenan nears the coffee table, she steadies herself and lowers the tray onto the table in front of them. She kneels down beside the coffee table and the tray. Saif does not look up at Jenan, nor does Jenan look at him. His mother and Mama watch. Jenan keeps her eyes on the tray.

In almost a whisper, Jenan asks Mama first,

“How many sugars do you take in your tea?”

Knowing Jenan, she probably could not come up with the gumption to ask Saif’s mother first, which would have been the proper thing to do. Mama will be angry.

Mama glares at Jenan and purses her lips for skipping the guests. Jenan knows that Mama takes one sugar in her tea. It does not matter anyway because Mama is not a guest.

Ameena thinks Jenan should stop being afraid. Ameena had to do the same thing when it was her turn to marry, and Ameena despises just the idea of serving tea. But she did it when Kareem and his mother came to ask for her hand, because it is simply something they all have to do when it is time for them to marry. Why is this simple task so difficult for Jenan?

It had been the only time Ameena served the tea, because Mama always assigned the task to Jenan. And normally Jenan served the tea effortlessly, especially because she was always familiar with the guests, but this time, Ameena can see that Jenan does not want to follow the rules. For once, Jenan does not want to do the proper thing. Ameena can tell that Jenan is angry, because she is obviously silent. When Jenan is obviously
silent, she is either angry or offended. Ameena can see her hand shaking as she puts a spoonful of sugar in the cup.

“Umm Saif, do you take sugar in your tea?” Mama asks. Mama takes over Jenan’s assigned tea serving task, the way she often did when she felt that they were about to embarrass her with their failure.

“Yes, one please,” his mother says. She seems to overlook Jenan’s mistake and still looks happy to be there.

Jenan places a spoonful of sugar in his mother’s tea and stirs. Her hand still shaking, she hands the cup of tea to his mother, who smiles at Jenan’s propriety. Jenan does not smile back, because she is keeping her eyes on the cups of tea and does not see the smile.

“Baba likes one sugar too,” Mama reminds Jenan. “And Khalto Laila likes two.” Jenan places another teaspoon of sugar in one cup of tea, and two in the third. She stirs.

“How many sugars for you Saif?” Mama asks.

“I like it very sweet,” he says in a low voice. Jenan puts three teaspoons of sugar in his teacup. If Ameena were Jenan, and she did not want to marry Saif, she would have put one sugar in the tea.

Jenan has finished preparing the tea. She puts her hand on either side of the tray and lifts it slowly, rising from where she is kneeling. She slowly carries the tray over to each of them, not looking up or speaking. They continue to observe her in silence. First, she takes the tray to Baba, then to Khalto Laila, then to Saif’s mother. She does not make eye contact, and keeps her eyes on the cups of tea.
“Salem edeiky,” Saif’s mother says.

Jenan turns the tray to the direction of Saif without replying to his mother. She is probably so nervous that Saif is the next person she must carry the tray to that she is unable to speak or respond. Ameena can tell by Mama’s face that she is not happy that Jenan did not take the tray to his mother first, and because she did not reply to her. Ameena knows Mama well. She did not have to see Mama’s face to know that it upset her.

Ameen knew that Jenan would take the tray to Saif last. She was probably so afraid that she saved him for last because she simply could not do it. Ameena wishes Jenan would have more courage. Saif reaches his hand to the tray and calmly takes the last cup.

“Sallem Edeiky,” he says in almost a whisper, keeping his eyes on the tea.

Jenan does not reply again. She walks around to the other side of the coffee table, sets down the tray and takes her seat. Saif takes a sip of tea and sets the cup of tea on the table in front of him. Mama motions for Jenan to follow her into the kitchen. Jenan does as told, and Ameena follows too. Once they are out of sight, Mama turns to face Jenan.

“What’s the matter with you? You don’t know how to be friendly?” Mama says. She glares at Jenan for some moments, then continues.

“Baba’s not going to like that. Ya Allah, ya Jenan. You are twenty years old now. Behave like it!”

She looks sternly at Jenan. “Take that tray and follow me back to the salon. And be polite.”
Jenan sighs.

“Come,” Mama says. She turns and walks back to the family room. Jenan follows.

“Can I bring you anything else, Saif?” Mama asks.

“Tislami, shukran,” he says, putting his hand on his chest. He is very well mannered. What more could Jenan ask for?

Mama smiles and takes her seat. At times they all sit without speaking, looking around the room, avoiding each other’s gaze and fiddling their fingers. Baba coughs occasionally and scratches his balding head.

Jenan had not spoken a single word the entire night. She glances at Saif sporadically, only when he speaks to Baba. Their conversation grows more and more boring for sometime. Then finally Baba allows Jenan and Saif to sit down together in the salon.

Hesham walks them both over to the salon and they sit. Ameena loses sight of them, so she sneaks down to the dining room and sits near them. They look at her and then at the ground—again. She moves to a seat behind the wall so they can no longer see her. Mama gives Ameena the look too, but Ameena ignores it. She wants to watch.

Mama is still looking at her. She gives Ameena the look again, but more ugly this time. She points up the stairs. Ameena sighs and moves back up the stairs so she can have the perfect view of them from the stair banisters, without Mama’s knowledge.

Saif sits on the second couch across from Jenan and Hesham leaves them alone. Ameena thinks Jenan is determined to avoid eye contact. It seems that Saif is doing the same. They are exactly alike, Ameena thinks. And Jenan still is not even slightly interested
in the idea of marrying someone exactly like her. Ameena thinks this is strange. Jenan should be wanting someone like her, since she is untrusting and afraid of everyone.

Saif is slim but strong looking, and pale like Jenan, with thick brown hair that is neatly brushed to the side of his head. It is an attractive hair cut. His face looks sad. The way Jenan’s face looks when she is sad. It is a very obvious thing when Jenan is sad. It cannot be hidden from her face.

His beard is trimmed short and well groomed, not long and unkempt. But under the beard, his face looks young, and his eyes are hazel and luminous. Ameena feels that Jenan must be insane.

There is no one else in the room but Jenan and him. For minutes and minutes they sit without speaking, looking around the room, avoiding each other’s gaze. As time drags on, Jenan fiddles her hands, while Saif stares into space straight ahead of him, coughing occasionally or scratching the back of his head. This is ridiculous. He is the man, shouldn’t he say something? If Ameena were Jenan, she certainly would not be the first to speak either. What is behind their silence?

Jenan glances at him sporadically. After a long, long quiet time, Saif asks her calmly and quietly, without turning his head, how she is doing. He is serious and unsmiling.

Jenan looks up at him, startled, and looks back down at the ground when she sees that his eyes are lowered. She politely replies that she is doing well, and gives thanks to Allah.

He clears his throat.
“I’m sorry about your brother in law. It’s a difficult situation to be dealing with,” he says calmly again, keeping his eyes lowered.

“Thank you,” she says. Ameena realizes that all of Nablus must have learned of Kareem’s arrest by now. Watching them sit together, she is reminded of her loss and holds back her tears.

The awkward silence begins again. Saif clears his throat, looks around, and scratches the back of his head. Jenan moves her hands to her knees and taps on them with her fingers. Then, surely to their relief, Mama and Saif’s mother walk in and interrupted their uncomfortable silence.

Jenan lets out an entrapped breath.

“How are we getting along?” Mama asks. Jenan and Saif both nod their heads like idiots, probably under the pressure of their mother’s gazes.

“What a lovely couple they make!” his mother says.

“Indeed they do!” Mama says smiling.

“Allhamdulilah, how wonderful! InshaAllah this will be a blessed marriage!” his mother says. The mothers continue smiling delightedly.

They have already turned it into a marriage. Jenan is probably terrified from this comment.

The evening has lasted a few hours. It is time for them to leave, and they all shake hands, except for Saif and Jenan, who say goodbye to everyone except for each other. Once they have gone, Jenan pulls Mama aside into the kitchen.
“You said I only had to meet him! You and his mother are already making this a marriage!”

“You need encouragement! This will be the best kind of marriage.”

“He didn't say a word to me in the family room!” Jenan says. This a false statement, Ameena thinks. He said more words than Jenan.

“But he's a shy man. And he must still be grieving his first wife. Give him some time to come around.”

“I'm the one who needs more time! I don't even know him or his family yet.”

“You will soon, and you’ll like them.”

“How do you know that?”

“From experience. This is how every woman feels at first habeebty! You just need to grow accustomed to them. Give it some more time, I promise you'll be happy.”

“Happy like you? You can’t promise that," Jenan says.

Mama tuts.

“Yumma, what if at the end of all this, I don't want to marry him?”

“And I suppose your going to want to marry the next man that comes along? I don’t want to hear anymore naive excuses. This one is the best.”

“You can’t force me to do anything,” she replies.

“Very soon, you’re going to want this.”

“Why do you all fancy yourselves matchmakers?” Jenan asks Mama.

Mama tuts again. “This is your naseeb. I know it.”
“But what if it's not? And if I refuse to marry, neither of you can force me under Islamic law. You have to have my consent, and you don't have it.”

Mama looks at her, a horrified look on her face.

“You disappoint me Jenan. Why wouldn't you want to do something good for yourself and your future? Don't you want to please Allah, by doing the right thing? It’s an obligation for Muslims to marry, half the *deen*, and your options are running out.”

Ameena knows that Mama is intentionally speaking about the one topic that Jenan does not argue with. Islam. Jenan's eyes scan the room for an answer.

“But what if I'm not happy in the end? What if I live a sad life?” Jenan says.

“But you will be! There is no doubt about that. Saif is a very, very good man. He just needs healing. Don't you want to please Allah by helping him heal?”

“How do you know I'll be happy?”

“From experience habeeby! I am much older and much wiser than you, and I know things that you have yet to learn. You are my daughter, and that's why you should follow my advice. Dear girl, if you don't marry now, when will you? You may not get another chance—especially at your age! Don’t let this blessing pass.”

“But I'm afraid. I don't know him. How can I live with him?”

“You will learn to know him my child. Do you think I loved your father when I first married him? I learned to love him with time and patience and now I am happier than ever. That is how it's done.”

Jenan says no more.
Mama notices the defeat in her face. She sets her hand on Jenan’s shoulder in comfort.

“I know this is a difficulty for you,” Mama says, “but Allah is testing you, so take my advice and be patient. Allah is with the patient ya binty.”

Tears begin streaming down Jenan’s cheeks. She starts to sniffle. Mama hugs her tightly.

“There there, my child,” Mama says. “Things are going to be just fine. All you need is time.”

Jenan leaves to her bedroom. Ameena follows her. Jenan’s shoulders sag as she walks. She lays down on her bed. Her tears begin to dry out on her cheeks and she rests her face on her pillow. Ameena wonders if her parents are being selfish. She knows her parents only want what is best for Jenan. For her to have a stable, happy life. On the other hand, it is always embarrassing for parents to have an unmarried daughter in Nablus. Are they trying to impress people by this marriage?

Ameena feels pity for Jenan, as she watches her there, disheartened, curled up on her bed. Much like she, herself, had been only days ago. What is behind Jenan’s suffering? Is it more than immaturity? Ameena wonders. She decides to say something encouraging to Jenan.

“If you’re sure you don’t want this Jenan, then you should speak up. It’s your decision to make,” Ameena says.

“Why should I use my voice, when no one hears it? Why should I ever bother talking again?” Jenan asks.
Ameena understands.

When silence stems from discouragement, there is a deepness to it, a darkness, that crawls into a cave and shuts out the world. Whomever it haunts, they become it, and then they cease for some time. It becomes a silence of longing, an echo in the wind. It’s like an animal that licks and mends its wounds in its hiding. There it sleeps reclusively, lamenting in spiritual depletion, remembering what it was that brought it there and aching for an ease. But it is the loudest silence possible, one that rings in the mind and consumes it in raw suffocation—it cannot be ignored.
Chapter 7:
The Meeting

Hesham and Ameena have snuck into the political meeting. They feel like they have obtained power, like they are capable.

Hesham had given her some of his clothes, which fit her loosely, and a keffiyeh to wrap her hair in. She folded them tightly and placed them at the bottom of her bag so Mama would not see that her purse was bulky. She also tossed an eyeliner stick in to add facial hair. She carried it on the side that Mama did not face. Hesham told Mama that he was taking her to Ramallah with him. Mama would have hit herself if she knew they were going to a political meeting, or anything that might lead to their arrest.

“What for?” Mama said. “Ameena doesn’t need to go with you. Go by yourself.”

This was a typical response from Mama. It always enraged Ameena.

“I am going, okay!” Ameena shouted. Mama would not stop her in her pursuit of getting Kareem back. And even though the meeting gave her no guarantee, it was something nonetheless.

“Is that right? What for?” Mama said.

“Yes. I need to get things for myself.” Ameena said.

“You don’t need anything.”

“You’re so ridiculous! Why can’t I go? Hesham will be with me!”

“Because, neither of you are mature enough. You go to Ramallah with me.”
Hesham walked out, probably irritated at their shouting, and Ameena followed him.

“Ameena!”

Ameena slammed the door and could hear Mama shouting from outside.

“Get back in this house!”

“No!” Ameena shouted at the door.

Mama followed them down the road.

“Ameena, I’m going to tell your Baba about this! You’re going to be sorry!”

“Do it!” Ameena said, walking faster. She knew Mama would never. Mama wanted to keep Baba in a good mood as much as the rest of them.

“Don’t worry Mama! I’ll watch over her. I won’t let her out of my sight. It’ll be fine, I swear!” Hesham said.

Mama stopped and huffed.

“Ya binit, you are going to drive me mad!” She began hitting her cheeks.

“Go! And be back before your father gets home, or he’ll throw us all out!” Mama said.

She turned back to the house.

“This girl is trying to get me divorced!” she said to herself, marching back.

When they arrived there, it was already dark. Ameena put Hesham’s clothes on behind the building where no one could see. The meeting was held at the Hajjawi’s house, whom they did not know very well. All of Hesham’s friends are present, but Hesham sat them away from them so that it would be easier to keep Ameena’s cover.
Ameena appreciates that he is willing to take the risk for her. She is desperate for any kind of information she can get on Kareem’s whereabouts, and this meeting is a hope for her.

They sit in the midst of a group of bearded men and smoke filled arguileh. There were men from the entrance of the large house to the back, all of them facing the mayor. Pipe smoke floats around the room.

“Who is this boy?” A man next to Hesham asks. Ameena recognizes him; he is their neighbor, Abu Areetha. Ameena starts breathing much harder.

“He’s my friend from Ram Allah,” Hesham replies.

“He’s so young looking. How old are you boy?” he asks Ameena.

Ameena does not want to look at him. She fears he will see that her eyes are feminine.

“Fifteen,” she replies, attempting to deepen her voice. It almost cracks.

“Ahh,” he says, eyeing her. “Well, you’ve got plenty of time to grow.”

Ameena nods and smiles politely. When he turns away she feels a settling in her chest, and thanks God.

The muttering men soften their voices and the meeting is about to start. It had been called urgently in light of the very recent and discouraging events. There was a bad beating on the outskirts of the city. A teenage boy was beating by the jeish for throwing rocks at their tanks. He was denied access to the hospital and bled to death. But Ameena can feel that there will be more to the meeting than just that. They sit outside, under the
stars, behind the hajjawi house. Men are handing out Arabic coffee and kharrroob, pouring them from Turkish coffee pots into tiny rounded glass cups.

“In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful,” Al Mukhtar begins. His beard is short and he wears a navy blue suit with a white kufi. He holds in his hand a list of current reports.

“Only a few nights ago, the PLO headquarters was attacked just outside of Ramallah. They blew a rocket through the fence surrounding the headquarters,” he reads, scanning the reports, “and then threw a series of bombs into the building. They brought it down. At least seventeen men were killed. Abu Riyad had rushed to the scene and said he saw body parts hanging from the trees.” A hum of muttering passes over the room. He slides the page he was reading to the end of the stack and begins scanning the page on the top.

“There have been numerous and unjustified arrests recently. They arrested Kareem Yunis unjustly at his wedding just a few weeks ago, along with many other of our young men, and the arrests continue. It is part of their strategy to keep our defenses down. The fewer young men we have, the more meager we are to them. It looks as though they’re arresting as many men of the military age as they can,” he finishes. He sets down the papers.

“Let us be clear about the purpose of our meeting tonight. Homes are continuing to be demolished, the settlers are seizing more of our lands, and our boys are being kidnapped from us right before our eyes. We are being made homeless. Just because your own homes haven’t been demolished, does not mean you are safe. It’s only a matter of
time before they reach us all. This has continued for fifty years. We must stop this now. I’m here to encourage you to say no more.”

The men applaud and cheer.

“No more will we tolerate this occupation, no more will we tolerate being treated like the famine of the Jewish.”

The applause continues. Ameena has never felt that kind of energy, and it is rising in her.

“No more will we be prohibited from the freedom of movement. We will visit our neighboring villages when we desire. We will travel our country freely. There will be no more massacring of our people, of our children. We will no longer be abused. We will no longer be raped and tortured. We will no longer be expelled from our homes.”

There is more applause and cheer.

“There is a resistance forming now, and I am proposing that we all join it. Men, women, and children. Let us all become a part of this uprising, this intifada. With growing numbers, we can stop this. With many people, we can stop them.”

“But what about our boys! Any crime a Palestinian commits, they arrest twenty!” a man shouts from the bank. His brow is thick and furrowed.

“Let’s break them out!” The man next to him bellows, waving his arm in the air. “We’ll send bombs their way and kill their officials!”

“Calm down my brothers, calm down. That won’t benefit us, and that’s what this uprising is about. We don’t need to attack them. We need organization. We need true leadership. We need to come together. Only then, can we be stronger than them. Only
then, can we defeat them. They have succeeded at dividing us, at keeping us apart, with
their roadblocks and their checkpoints. But no more.”

The applause is so loud that it rings in Ameena’s ears.

“This resistance is not a violent one, it is a collective coming together of the
masses, of civil disobedience and marching in the streets.”

Some of the men in the room fold their arms at these words. Some of them frown.

“Our anger is justified,” he continues, “but it will not solve our dilemma. Don’t
forget that the Prophet, salla Allahu ‘aleihy wassallam said: “the strong man is not the
one who can wrestle. The strong man is the one who controls himself at the time of
anger.”

“Sallahu aleihy wassallam,” the group repeated.

Many of the men nod at this.

“This movement I am speaking of started in the Jabalia Refugee camp in Gaza,
and now it’s moving our way. We should embrace it along with our people, those who
have lost their homes, who are living in the desert, and on the streets. Soon we may need
a place to stay ourselves, so imagine yourselves in their shoes and be generous. It is
necessary for us to give our brothers and sisters as much comfort as we can in times like
these.”

He scans the men in the room. “For God’s sake, if they come knocking
on your doors, answer them,” he said, looking sternly into their eyes. “Don’t turn them
away as if they weren’t your people, as if they had brought their homelessness on their
selves. We must support each other, take care of each other, or else we can never have a state of our own again.”

“So, I’m asking all of you now. Will you be a part of this? Will you join this movement?”

The men cheer and clap.

“Then, God willing, we will march! We will march! We will march!”

The applause grows louder.

Slowly the applause comes to a stop and the room becomes quiet.

“Shukran jazeeran, and may Allah bless us with His guidance and strength.”

Al Mukhtar becomes quiet and the men begin conversing with each other. He has finished his speech.

Suddenly, Ameena makes eye contact with Abu Hashim. She stops breathing. Abu Hashim has known her always. He knows her face. She can see the recognition in his eyes. His gaze is unwavering. Her eyes cannot withstand the pressure. She looks away. She feels ashamed. Abu Hashim has never given her such a look before. He has always been kind to her. He must be deeply disappointed.

Ameena is afraid that she will not be able to accomplish what she has come for.

“Hesham,” she whispers. “Let’s talk now with Al Mukhtar before its too late. Abu Hashim has spotted me. Hesham nods.

“Follow me,” he says. He stands up and guides Ameena through the crowd until they reach Al Mukhtar. He is already speaking with an elderly man, and has his hand on
the elderly man’s shoulder. He whispers in his ear. Hesham and Ameena wait. Al Mukhtar pats the elderly man on the back and turns his face to Hesham and Ameena.

“Ya Mukhtar, I’m Kareem’s brother in law. We don’t know where they are keeping him and we don’t know what to do. Can you help us find him?” Hesham asks him.

“Ya akhi, this has happened to many of our boys. What can I do about this? Nothing. But, if we come together, if we unite, we can free all of our sons, our husbands, our brothers. This is why we are here tonight.”

Hesham nods. Ameena is weakened. How many times will she hear this answer?

“Let’s go,” she says to Hesham.

As they are leaving, Hesham’s friend Ramy stops them.

“You’re friend, Hesham. He looks like a girl,” he mutters.

*

Jenan has left for the markets with Mama, so Ameena does not waste any time. She runs straight to Jenan’s room, and picks up where she left off in her journal.

*

Jenan watches Nablus from the height of her balcony. Spring has arrived and Nablus is just as it has always been, the lush acres that roll out in front of her. Farmers tend to the olive and citrus groves, the thousands of dunams that glisten as they stretch over the area. It is quiet in these farms, except for the buzz of insects and the laughter of
children. Trains rattle through the town, shaking the coral earth. Palm trees stretch overhead as women wander the markets. They cook elaborate meals in their kitchens, of rice and meat and spices. Or hang linens on laundry lines in the heat of the day. Shepherds carry sticks and walk their goats through the roads. This is what it is. This is her Palestine.

She loves the land. But she fears the people. She wants to be away from them. Jenan attempts to breath away her pain. She cannot escape her fate. Mama and Baba want this too deeply for her.

But she loves Bilal. She has denied it for too long. She desires him. Even though she does not want to tolerate a man. If she must marry for God’s sake, she would prefer him, though she has not met him yet. She sees him throughout the day, watches him work. He is calm, quiet. He is strong. He has a sharp gaze and his head is covered with short brown hair. She likes the thickness of his wrists and his slenderness. The hair he wears on his face.

The devil is encouraging her, and she is unable to stop her thoughts. She is ashamed. Sometimes, she sees him laugh with other men. He does not speak to her when he passes. She admires that he does not allow himself to succumb temptation. Once, he passed by her and their eyes met, but they lowered their gazes.

And since then, she has denied her desire for him. She wishes it were he who asked for her hand. She wonders if he thinks of her.

*  

Ameena is stunned. She closes Jenan’s journal.