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'I'LL NEVER GET used to it,' Tawfiq said as they drove into the square.

Sofia knew what he was talking about. 'I quite like it,' she offered, looking at Behnaz's turquoise gate.

Three months previously Sofia had returned from her annual holiday in Sydney to find Behnaz's old brown gate painted vivid turquoise. When she complimented Behnaz on the gate's makeover the only response she got was a 'humph'. When she queried Behnaz about the colour choice she got the silent treatment. It was left to Iman to fill Sofia in on the scandal of Behnaz's turquoise gate.

Behnaz's nephew, who had been staying with his aunt while Sofia was away, had been put to work painting the gate. Being an enterprising fellow, and careful with his afghani, the nephew secured a half-used can of turquoise paint from a friend for half a packet of cigarettes. While most people, including Ahmad, Hadi and Tawfiq, didn't like the turquoise gate, Iman said the reaction of Ahmad's wife, Badria, had been particularly harsh, although she suspected that the 'miserable' Badria had not only been offended by the vibrancy and beauty of that particular





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shade of turquoise but had felt betrayed by Behnaz, who she consider to be a kindred dour spirit. Iqbal found the whole thing an amusing diversion in the square, Rashid had no opinion, and Jabril and Zahra, whose home had mauve trimmings, quite liked it, but Iman positively loved it.

For once someone was 'thinking outside the box', she claimed, ignoring the fact that the paint was turquoise because Behnaz and her nephew were stingy with their afghani. So inspired was Iman by the gate that she told everyone about a village in Indonesia where they had painted their homes rainbow colours to attract the tourist dollar. Wouldn't it be a good idea if everyone in Shaahir Square did the same thing? When Iman pulled up photos on her phone she had to concede that the Indonesian village might have gone a little overboard with their cans of paint. Shaahir Square didn't need to be so radical – at least until everyone got used to the idea, Iman had argued. She suggested everyone painted only their door or gate a rainbow colour to begin with. 'Imagine,' she said, 'if Shaahir Square became famous and tourists flocked here from all over the world?'

There were those who weren't so sure this argument furthered Iman's plan for her 'Rainbow Shaahir Square', although it did have its devotees. Omar had shown some enthusiasm by offering to paint his shop door purple if someone else would paint theirs orange first. Unsurprising, Ahmad, who initially hadn't liked the turquoise gate, quite liked the idea of hordes of tourists flocking to the square and began toying with the idea of painting his shutter red, until he made the mistake of telling Badria. According to Hadi, who had eavesdropped on the entire conversation, Ahmad had quickly folded and his idea





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of a red shutter was brought to its inevitable end. After some consideration, Babur became a convert. Surely if tourists flocked to the square his famous *chaikhana* would become even more famous? Within a couple of weeks, however, Iman's 'Rainbow Shaahir Square' campaign had gone the way of Ahmad's red shutter and Omar's purple door, although Behnaz's turquoise gate remained turquoise.

During all this Behnaz had remained silent, although secretly pleased with the drama she had caused. Not only did she love the colour (which in her mind had become her idea) but she loved the controversy *and* the fact that she had got all of that for nothing.

As Tawfiq pulled up in the car in front of the turquoise gate, Rashid was squatting, talking with Behnaz who, with full shopping bags in both hands, appeared to have just arrived home.

'Is this a meeting we're not invited to?' Sofia asked with a cheeky smile.

'No,' they answered in unison, finding the question strange. With her Aussie humour being lost on its intended victims, Sofia was about to head to her surgery when she saw Chief Wasim enter the square, heading home for lunch. Seeing her husband, Behnaz quickly disappeared into the house to prepare the lunch that should have already been waiting. With Chief Wasim sailing past as he acknowledged Sofia, Rashid and Tawfiq, Sofia quickly followed him through the gate before closing it behind her so Rashid and Tawfiq might not hear what she had to say.

'Chief Wasim, can I have a word, please?'

Unaware that she had followed him, Wasim stopped mid-stride and turned to look at Sofia. 'Of course. What is it I can do for you?'





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'Do you know about Farahnaz's little brother?'

He raised his thick black eyebrows questioningly. 'No. What about Farahnaz's little brother?'

'Rayi's gone missing.'

'I'm sorry to hear this,' he said, as if he said these words a thousand times a day.

'It's possible he's been kidnapped.'

Wasim frowned. 'Who's saying this?'

'No one, but we think he might have been.'

'Who's we?'

'Dr Jabril and Taban ... and me.'

'What evidence do you have for this claim?' he said rather stiffly.

Sofia was confused by the chief's antagonism. 'It's not a claim, more a fear, and we have no evidence yet. What are the police doing? I mean, what do you do in these situations?'

Wasim offered Sofia an empty smile before walking over to the canary cage hanging off the lowest branch of the pomegranate tree. Sticking his little finger through the bars, he made cooing noises to the surprised canary. As the canary began backing away from the intruding finger, the chief lost all interest.

'I never liked that bird much,' he said, turning back to Sofia. 'Now, what were you saying? Ah, yes. To be truthful, Dr Sofia, there's not much we can do. Sadly, little boys go missing in Afghanistan every day and we rarely find them.'

'But this is the fourth boy to go missing from Jamal Mina. Two went a couple of months ago and now another two have gone in the last week. For all we know there might be more. Someone has to be taking them.'





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‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Well, not about someone taking them, but four boys have disappeared in a short space of time. Don’t you remember Dr Jabril told you about the first two?’

‘Ah, yes,’ he said, as if he had forgotten. ‘And now another two are missing, you say?’

‘Yes, maybe more.’ Sofia had the feeling the chief was more interested in getting to his lunch than getting to the bottom of the missing boys. She felt the desperation rising. She couldn’t let him disappear into the house before she got some sort of commitment. ‘What do you think is happening to them?’

‘Was each incident reported to the police?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m sure Taban would have, or their parents. Perhaps you can make enquiries and see what’s happening?’

‘I’ll look into it,’ he said, turning away.

‘Taban knows everything about the boys,’ she said. She was losing him. ‘You could start by talking with her.’

The chief turned back to Sofia and gave her a smile that came nowhere near his eyes. ‘Leave it to me, Dr Sofia. As I said, I’ll look into it.’ He turned away again and she grabbed his arm, immediately letting it go in horror at what she had done.

‘You’ll let me know what you discover?’ she pleaded, knowing she had tried his patience for far too long.

‘I will, but you must remember,’ the chief said, pointing his finger at her, ‘if these little boys want to run away, there’ll not be much chance of finding them.’

‘Four? Four boys from the same neighbourhood in two months? Four boys with desperate parents? Don’t you think there’s something wrong?’

The chief sighed. ‘As I said, I’ll see what I can do, but if you





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will excuse me now, Dr Sofia, I must have my lunch and return to work.'

Sofia watched him disappear into the house before returning to Rashid and Tawfiq squatting outside the gate, talking. 'It's lunchtime,' she said. 'Aren't you two interested in eating?'

'We're waiting for you,' Tawfiq said. 'Do you need me this afternoon?'

'No, and it looks like I mightn't need you tomorrow because I'll probably be going to Kandahar with MSF, so both of you can have the weekend off.' The bonus of going with MSF was that the organisation seemed to be off limits for attacks from insurgency groups.

Tawfiq slid up the wall until he was standing. 'We will take you like we always do.'

'Wouldn't you rather take the car and visit your family?'

'Of course, but I have a job. Rashid and I will do this.'

Sofia put her hands on her hips, looking from one man to the other as Rashid flicked the butt of his cigarette into the square before standing also. 'What's really going on here?'

'I think Dr Jabril will want us to do our job.'

Sofia shook her head. 'This is the new security thing, isn't it?' Neither man spoke. 'Okay, I'll speak with Dr Jabril, but right now I'm going to the surgery. Rashid, do you need to walk me across the square?'

'I do, Dr Sofia.' As they walked off, Tawfiq headed over to Babur's for lunch.

'How are you today?' she asked Iqbal when they reached the stairs.

'Better than most days.'

She stopped. 'And why is that?'





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‘I think we have a little intrigue here in the square.’

‘Ah,’ Sofia said, crouching down in front of him. ‘And what intrigue would that be, my friend?’

‘I can’t tell you, can I, if you might have a part in it?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Have I got a part in it?’

‘I don’t know yet, do I?’

Deciding it had to be about Daniel, Sofia stood up again. ‘I’m pretty sure I’m not involved in any intrigue, Iqbal. I’m thinking there are too many vivid imaginations in the square.’

‘What else do we have to do?’ she heard him say as she disappeared up the stairs.

