

WHEN
the
APRICOTS
BLOOM

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The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.

Rumi

Basra Province, 1978

Huda fished the knife from the pocket of her long apricot dress. Rania eyed the *jambiya*'s sharp tip and buffalo-horn handle and grinned in approval.

"That's perfect for our oath." Rania's amber eyes dilated with a jittery mix of fear and anticipation. "It's even better than the knife in the American movie."

"Last week, I saw a real American. A woman," said the younger girl proudly. "She was on the corniche, eating ice cream and watching the boats."

"I've seen plenty of foreign women in Baghdad," said her fourteen-year-old companion, not to be outdone. "Teachers and nurses, mostly. They like to picnic by the Tigris."

"Do you think they've ever sworn an oath like this?" Huda stared up at Rania. She'd grown taller and slimmer in the three months she'd been away at the prestigious Baghdad Ladies High School. Huda felt dowdy beside her, even in her favourite dress.

"What should we say?" she asked.

Rania eyed the double-bladed knife in Huda's hand. The ivory

handle was stained from years of use. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders.

“Today we vow to be blood sisters,” she intoned. “Closer than sisters from the same womb.”

Impressed, Huda nodded and repeated the pledge. The two girls added a promise of loyalty and to come to one another’s aid whenever called.

“Don’t forget about secrets,” said Huda. “We mustn’t keep secrets from each other.”

Rania paused, then pressed her hand to her heart. “No secrets.”

“What’s the punishment for breaking a blood oath?” asked Huda.

Rania consulted the cloudless sky, its blue so perfect it could break a heart.

“If the blood oath is broken,” she declared theatrically, “then the penalty is sorrow.”

Huda threw her a sceptical glance.

“Sorrow?” she said. “For how long? A day? A week? It’s got to be more than that.”

Rania raised her chin imperiously.

“Sorrow for the oath breaker,” she declared, “and for the generation that follows her.”

Huda nodded and echoed her words. Slowly, their eyes swivelled to the dagger. Rania swallowed nervously. Huda wondered if she would back out. Would the oath count if it wasn’t sealed in blood? Without it, would Rania return to her new friends and forget all about her vow with a simple village girl?

“Do you want to skip the blood part?” Huda offered reluctantly.

“No way.” Rania shook her head. “That’s the most important thing.”

Huda grinned in relief.

“Okay, let’s prick our thumbs and press them together.” She handed the dagger to Rania. “You do it, cut my thumb.”

“Really?” Rania winced. “Are you sure?”

“Do it,” said Huda. Rania wouldn’t find many girls at Baghdad Ladies High School prepared to risk a digit for a friend.

Rania raised the knife, grit her teeth, and jabbed the point into the soft flesh of Huda’s thumb.

“Ouch!” Huda hobbled about, trying not to bleed on her long dress. “I thought you’d give me a countdown.”

Rania eyed the blood dripping from Huda’s thumb onto the sand. Her face turned the colour of summer grass.

“Hurry.” She thrust the knife at Huda. “Before I lose my nerve.”

Huda pressed the dagger to Rania’s thumb, felt the skin resist the blade. Rania closed her eyes and turned her head. Huda pushed. The skin parted beneath the knife like a boiled egg, deeper than she expected. Rania’s eyes flew open, big and wide as a calf’s. They grabbed each other’s hand and pressed their thumbs together.

“Sisters forever.” They locked eyes. “Or sorrow for us and the generation to come.”

CHAPTER 1

Baghdad, 2002

Huda paced her backyard, trying to brush off her spat with her husband. In the distance, above al-Dora refinery, columns of flames pierced the night. An easterly wind pushed the stench of the burning gas away from New Baghdad, so all Huda could smell were the orange and apricot trees by the fence. She knew the wind could turn at any time, but right then the gas flares were beautiful, like candles lined up on a giant's birthday cake.

The bell rang at the front gate. Huda paused mid-step and wondered, Had Abdul Amir forgotten his keys when he stormed off to the coffee shop? Or had her husband cooled down and decided to eat dinner with her after all? Huda hurried inside through the kitchen door. A nougat box lay spread-eagled on the counter, cellophane wrappers strewn like evidence of a hasty crime. Huda frowned and swept them into the bin. So much for her diet.

The bell sounded again. Something in its flat, insistent tone made her falter. She scurried down the hallway, heels slapping against the tile. In the foyer, she paused by a console table decorated with family portraits. The largest of the pewter frames faced

the wall. Huda flipped it around. The president stared back at her, eyes dark as tar. Medals marched across his chest.

She quickly moved the president's portrait to a prominent position between a photo of her and Abdul Amir on their wedding day, and a snap of their son, Khalid, wearing a suit and tie at his thirteenth birthday party. Next, she set to work unlocking the front door: unlatching chains, turning keys, sliding deadbolts. She ran her hands over her hair and heaved open the door. Two secret police officers strode down the driveway.

Huda quivered. *Lock the bolts; hide under the bed*, she thought. But she knew that wouldn't work. These men were like dogs: show fear and they bite. Behind them, the padlock from the gate lay in chunks on the concrete. The broken metal caught the glare of the floodlights over the carport. The larger of the two men shoved a pair of bolt cutters into the pocket of his leather jacket. Huda imagined his pockets contained all sorts of instruments: for breaking, slicing, and prising apart.

"As-salaam alaikum." Her voice wobbled. "What brings you here tonight, my countrymen?"

"Sister, my apologies for a visit at the dinner hour," called Abu Issa, the older and slighter of the two men. He too was wearing a boxy leather jacket. Men like him were never without them, night or day, even when the sun scorched the blue from the sky and the bitumen on the roads melted into sticky pools.

Without waiting for an invitation, Abu Issa and his bolt-cutting partner barrelled through the front door. Their bulk filled the foyer and pushed the oxygen out. Huda retreated down the hallway, careful not to turn her back. The men followed. Sand crunched beneath their boots—no amount of sweeping could keep the desert out. The fine grains went where they wanted, just like the officers of the *mukhabarat*.

"May I offer you tea?" Huda's voice came out high and tight.

"Yes, please, dear," said Abu Issa. "Three sugars."

"Two only for me," grunted the larger man. "I'm watching my weight."

Huda waved them into the sitting room and then ducked into the kitchen. In the window above the sink, her reflection stared back at her. Her large dark eyes were even wider than normal, and her plump cheeks were whittled into tight angles. The mouth that Abdul Amir once likened to a rosebud was a bloodless line. No matter how often Huda saw it, she was always surprised by how fear transformed the most familiar face into that of a stranger.

She asked herself, why were Abu Issa and his partner here? It had been only two weeks since their last visit. *Please, Khalid*, she prayed, *forget your curfew. Stay at Bakr's and play computer games.*

Huda quickly warmed the tea in the kettle and poured it into three thimble-size *istikan* glasses. The liquid leaped over the hour-glass sides and pooled in the delicate saucers. She wiped them clean, balanced the tea, sugar bowl, and spoons on a tray, and carried it into the sitting room.

“Sit, sit.” Abu Issa waved her towards a corner chair—as if he were the host and she were the visitor. His bolt-cutting partner stared at her, eyes flat as night. Huda’s breath bunched in her throat.

“Let us chat,” said Abu Issa, “about your work at the Australian embassy.”

Huda nodded. This was not the first time the mukhabarat had come asking questions about events at the embassy: correspondence and meetings, comings and goings, the latest rumours. Everyone who worked with foreigners could expect such visits. Her lacquered nails carved half-moons into her palms. *Think of your good salary*, she reminded herself. Besides, if it wasn’t her job, the secret police would find some other pretence to sit on her couch, to drink her tea, to gauge her fealty.

“How can I help you, Abu Issa?” She figured a rotten tooth was best pulled fast. “Is there anything in particular that you would like to know?”

“How is your relationship with Deputy Ambassador Wilson progressing?” He sipped his tea daintily, little finger splayed in the air. “Does he trust you?”

“I do my best to be reliable and professional.”

“But does he trust you? Confide in you?”

Huda returned the istikan to her lap. Once again, liquid splashed into the saucer and stared at her like a baleful amber eye.

“He hasn’t told me anything unusual.” She forced a smile, even as her pulse throbbed at her neck. “I do routine typing and filing, as you know. I translate his letters when he has matters to convey to our beloved government.”

“And what of his wife?”

Huda blinked.

“His wife?”

“How well do you know her? Are you friends?”

“Ally seems nice enough.” Huda shrugged. “Once in a while, she comes to the office to break her boredom, that’s all.”

Abu Issa raised the tea glass to his lips. He wore a sharp-edged ring with the president’s eagle crest. If he slapped her cheek, it would draw blood.

“No doubt your boss tells his wife all manner of things,” said Abu Issa. “The foreigners call it *pillow talk*.”

Huda stiffened. Her istikan rattled in its saucer.

“These Western men are reliant on their wives’ advice. They call them partners.” Abu Issa shook his head. “Is it a business or a marriage?”

The two men snickered, disgust audible amid their amusement. Abruptly, the Bolt Cutter sat forward and ladled sugar into his tea. The small glass looked ridiculous in his meaty hand. He would need no ring to bloody her cheek.

“These Western women, they like to talk.” The humour drained from Abu Issa’s laugh. “Every day they go on television and bare their shameful secrets to the cameras, for anyone to see. They confess their sins to some Negro woman called Oprah. It should not be a difficult task then, to win her confidence.”

The men eyed her intently. Huda stared at the floor.

“We want you to befriend the diplomat’s wife. If the West acts to destabilise our beloved nation, or God forbid, strike us again

with their unholy missiles, your boss will certainly receive warning. He may let it slip to his wife. And, surely, he would make plans to send her out of the country.”

“I don’t think—”

“Stay close to the diplomat’s wife.” Abu Issa sat forward. “Watch and listen. She may give us early warning, like a dog that howls before the *sharqi* blows in from the desert.”

The front door rattled. The knob thumped against the foyer wall. Khalid’s sneakers squelched over the tiles in the hallway.

“Mum? Dad?”

Huda’s heart constricted. She put down her tea and dashed out to the hall. Khalid loped towards her, clutching a fragment of the padlock in his fist.

“Somebody cut the—”

“I am busy with guests, my son.” She blocked his path. “Go to your room and wait for me.”

“But the lock . . .” He peered past her shoulder. “Who’s that? Where’s Dad?”

Huda grabbed both of Khalid’s shoulders. She wanted to hug him tight, to crush him to her chest and never let go. Instead, she steered him towards his room.

“Do your homework. Now.”

“Ouch!” Khalid twisted out of her grip. “Your nails hurt.”

She fixed him with her most evil eye. It was the type of glare usually reserved for his most heinous crimes, like the time he cursed in front of his grandmother or when he and Bakr climbed the orange tree and bared their backsides at the teenage girls next door.

“Go!” she hissed.

Khalid shot a final glance past her shoulder, then slouched towards his bedroom. Huda crept back to the sitting room. The mukhabarat had finished their tea.

“We will leave you now, sister. It is late and no doubt you want to take care of your son.” Abu Issa rose to his feet. “He is your most precious possession, is he not?”

* * *

It was almost midnight when Huda gave up waiting for Abdul Amir to come home and crawled into bed. Above her head, the blades of the fan pushed warm air around the bedroom. She lay on her back and catalogued the noise of the night: the buzz of the fluorescent light in the foyer, the gritty wind scraping at the windows, the click-clack of nocturnal insects. She kept her breathing shallow, listening for the dull snap of a lock or the tread of heavy boots on her driveway.

In the distance, a car rumbled. Was Abdul Amir returning from the coffee shop at last? Huda sighed like the creaking fan. These days her husband's black moods were worse than ever. Earlier that evening, when she arrived home from work, he'd been slumped in front of the television, still wearing his baggy pyjama pants and singlet.

"I'm hungry," he'd grunted, eyes trained on the TV screen. "What's for dinner?"

Huda slipped out of her kitten-heeled pumps. "I picked up a roast chicken and rice on the way home."

"You're not going to cook lamb stew? You used to cook it every Thursday."

Huda ignored the whine in his voice.

"There's not enough time. Stew can't be rushed or the meat will be tough." She glanced towards the kitchen. "Is Khalid home yet?"

"He's eating dinner at Bakr's house." Abdul Amir stabbed at the buttons on the remote control. "At least my son will get a home-cooked meal."

"Come now, be fair. I didn't have time tonight."

"Tonight. Yesterday. Last week. You are always busy with your work. What sort of wife puts her family second?"

And what sort of husband sits in his pyjamas all day?

Abdul Amir kept his eyes on the television. Huda remembered when she would have happily drowned in his sea-green gaze. She remembered when a kind word was never far from his lips, when

he whispered little jokes in her ear. Were those days gone forever? Was that memory, like so many, best forgotten? Huda tried once again to lure her husband from his sour mood.

“I chose a plump chicken. And I will fetch some cucumbers and tomatoes from the garden. You have a magic way with the plants, my dear.”

“You should not be working for foreigners.” Abdul Amir punched the remote again. “They don’t respect our culture. They don’t respect family. Otherwise they would realise a woman should be home in time to prepare a proper dinner.”

He turned his head and glared at her. She glared back.

“Without them we would have no chicken for dinner. No meat at all.”

Abdul Amir lurched from the couch and lumbered past her. She followed him down the hall and into the bedroom. He threw a checked shirt over his singlet and scowled at his master’s in finance diploma hanging in a frame on the wall. After ten years of sanctions, the economy was almost dead. No one needed an analyst like him to check its pulse. Like Iraq itself, Abdul Amir’s pride had taken so many hits, Huda feared it might never recover.

He swapped his pyjama pants for trousers and stomped back to the living room.

“These foreigners only want to destroy our country.”

“That’s not true.” Huda pursed her lips in irritation. Of course, she’d thought twice about working at the embassy. Anyone even remotely connected with foreigners, especially Westerners, drew the suspicion of the mukhabarat. A case of the pox was more welcome than that. But what was she supposed to do?

Abdul Amir’s company wasn’t the only business to close its doors. Huda’s previous employer, an agricultural import-export company, had resorted to paying her with sacks of almonds or pistachios from shipments abandoned in their warehouse. Unfortunately, Huda couldn’t pay her bills with rancid nuts. Then a cousin who worked as a driver at the German embassy called. He’d heard through the gossip driver grapevine that the Austra-

lians down the road needed a secretary with good English and typing speed of eighty words per minute. When he mentioned the salary, Huda's eyes bulged. She'd swallowed her reservations about working with foreigners. Not only would this cover their debts, the salary was more than her and Abdul Amir's former pay cheques combined.

"The staff at the embassy are nice people," she scolded Abdul Amir. "They're ordinary people. Like us."

"Everyone knows, Australia is nothing but America's obedient lapdog."

"You can't judge people by the actions of their—" Huda broke off as the six o'clock anthem blared from the television. The president rode across the screen in an army jeep. Abdul Amir grabbed the remote and flicked to the next channel. From a gilded balcony, the president saluted a battalion of goose-stepping troops. He growled and tossed the remote back onto the couch.

"I fear that people will question your loyalty." His words were barely audible above the television, but like most sensible people, they'd long ago grown accustomed to reading lips, filling in blanks, talking in code.

"I love my country," whispered Huda. "You know that."

"It is not what I know that matters," he muttered. "I'm going to the coffee shop."

"What about dinner?"

He had shrugged, grabbed his car keys, and stormed off, leaving her to seek comfort in a box of nougat, unaware that the mukhabarat were about to descend upon their home.

Huda rolled onto her side and checked the clock on the bedside. She wondered, Was Khalid asleep? Or was he huddled under his faded Star Wars sheets, shining his flashlight on a dog-eared copy of *Harry Potter*? The boy wanted nothing more than to enrol in the Hogwarts Academy. Pity he did not show the same enthusiasm for study in real life.

Huda's ears pricked up at the familiar rattle of Abdul Amir's Corolla station wagon turning into their street. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and into a pair of fluffy pink slippers. A Mother's Day gift from Khalid three years ago, they were worn at the heels. In the hallway, she paused and stuck her head into his bedroom. Khalid was curled up like a snail. She continued to the front door, unlocked the deadbolts, and released the chain.

Outside, dry leaves whispered in the darkness. Abdul Amir's voice boomed from the far side of the gate.

"What the hell? Have you locked me out of my own home, woman?"

"The lock was broken." As Huda pried open the gate, she could smell the burnt molasses of *nargilah* smoke embedded in her husband's hair and clothes. "I had to replace it."

"How on earth did it break?" Abdul Amir waved his hands about like an angry prophet scolding his flock. "Do I need to punish Khalid again?"

"Please, my dear, be quiet." Huda peeked along the potholed street. Tall walls stretched in both directions, draped in flowering bougainvillea or fragrant jasmine. All were topped with metal spikes or shards of broken glass. "I'll explain everything—in the backyard."

Abdul Amir stiffened.

"The backyard?" he whispered. His hands were still raised, but now he looked less a righteous prophet and more like the victim of a stick-up.

"That would be best," Huda murmured nervously.

Like his wife before him, Abdul Amir scanned the street. The wind groaned, and grains of pale desert sand scratched against their cheeks.

A razor-thin moon hovered high over Huda's backyard. The flames of al-Dora still spiked the horizon, but the wind had begun to turn. Huda's nose wrinkled at the smell of burning gas. Abdul

Amir stood on his toes and peered over the neighbour's fence. No lamp glowed in their window. Their own house was dark and quiet too. Still, it was safer not to talk indoors—walls have ears, and so do teenage sons.

Abdul Amir and Huda huddled close.

“What did you tell them?” he whispered.

“There was nothing to tell,” said Huda. “I barely know the woman. If she stops by the office, we chat about the weather, small talk, that's all. I mean, why would I go asking for trouble?”

Huda scanned the dim reaches of the garden: the orange and lemon trees, the vegetable patch in the corner, the wrought-iron swing seat that rocked back and forth on squeaky hinges. Abdul Amir raked his hands through his hair. In the moonlight, his fingers were pale as bone.

“What do you know about this woman?”

“Ally seems nice enough,” mumbled Huda. “But it can't be long before she packs up and returns home. The heat and the sun always prove too much for the embassy wives.”

And the loneliness too, thought Huda. She remembered meeting Ally a month ago, at the end of her ten-hour drive from Jordan to Baghdad. The young woman had stumbled from the embassy Land Cruiser, hand raised to ward off the sun, legs wobbling like a sailor stepping ashore after months at sea.

“All the way here, I kept looking for white sand dunes and camel trains.” Ally laughed awkwardly. No one had the heart to tell her that was some other country.

Huda remembered when women like Ally had flocked to Baghdad: British nurses, French schoolteachers, and the plump wives of American oilmen. Tourists filled the cafes and strolled the banks of the Tigris. But nowadays, the expats were gone. So were the tour buses. The rail line to Istanbul was severed, and NATO jets shot down any planes that entered Iraqi airspace.

These days, only a handful of diplomats and United Nations workers ventured through the wide western desert to Baghdad. Very rarely did their wives join them—and like the exotic par-

rots at al-Ghazl pet market, the women soon went off their food, drooped, and plucked out their own feathers. Then they disappeared back into the desert, pale-skinned gypsies in four-wheel-drive caravans, leaving nothing behind but a trail of dust and perhaps a forgotten sunhat. Eventually, their husbands were posted elsewhere and life resumed happily. At least, Huda assumed it was happily. It was almost impossible to stay in touch with those outside Iraq's borders. Unwise, even, to embark on such friendships in the first place.

"What is she like, this Ally?" Abdul Amir paced back and forth. "Is she one of those arrogant foreigners who know nothing of history and believe we're all savages?"

Huda shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Will it be difficult to befriend her?"

The moon slid behind a cloud. Huda was glad of the darkness.

"I don't know," she lied. Ally wasn't stand-offish at all, and Huda sensed it would be easy to draw her close.

Until this evening, Huda had thought she could handle the obligatory visits from the mukhabarat. She kept her answers brief but true and made it a rule to avoid gossip. She was only a secretary. She had nothing to hide. Besides, her Australian bosses weren't fools. They told their Iraqi staff only what they were happy for the government also to know. The rest they kept to themselves.

Huda remembered depositing her first embassy pay cheque and how the bank clerk's eyes widened as he eyed her salary. His usual sneer disappeared. He called her *madam* for the first time, and asked if she'd like tea while he processed the cheque. She'd relished that moment far more than she cared to admit. Now, the strings attached to her job drew tight around her neck.

Abdul Amir stopped pacing back and forth across the lawn.

"Did Abu Issa offer you money?" he said.

"Money?" Huda frowned. "Of course not. No one gets rewarded for answering their questions."

"Let's be honest. They want more than that. Much more." He

ripped a prickly sow thistle from the lawn. “I heard sometimes they pay informants.”

Huda tasted the sour gas from the refineries on her tongue.

“I am not an informant.”

“You wanted the embassy job.” Abdul Amir snorted. “You wanted to work with foreigners. Did you not consider there might be a price to pay?”

Huda had thought she was so smart, that she could type a few letters, take the foreigners’ money, and manage the mukhabarat too. She’d ignored the voice inside her whispering, *You’re playing with fire*. She searched her husband’s face. His eyes were nothing but shadows.

“Have I not paid enough already?” she asked.