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The man in the faded turban at the front of the dray clicked his tongue and drew the mule to the side of the hot bitumen. Malika waited for the policeman and the boy – Tahir, he had mumbled once – to get off before clambering down herself. They waited at the roadside for a car and then a bus to pass, before hurrying across. Their feet stirred up the white dust that lay everywhere around them as they followed the path to the village, coating Malika's leggings and the policeman's black trousers, just as it had whitewashed the roofs of the homes that lay ahead.

Passing wooden gates, they followed a corridor between bleached, mud-brick houses to a clearing where the branches of a giant fig tree spread wide, almost touching the buildings. The policeman motioned for them to wait beneath the tree and crossed to the far end of the clearing, where two old men were sitting cross-legged in the dust. They looked at him as he squatted in front of them.

The air was cool under the branches. Malika marvelled at their size, at the way the roots grew down from them towards the ground, as if searching for a home. The morning had been

long and her mouth was as dry as her stomach was empty. She sat and picked up a dusty leaf, rubbing it between her fingers. She smiled as her fingers became speckled white and the leaf's deep green colour emerged. It was the same dust that had lain across the road they travelled on that morning, with the train line constantly beside them. The policeman had told Tahir that the line connected the towns of the north with Lahore and the other great cities of the south. Malika liked the thought of towns being connected, if only by dust and noisy trains.

When the policeman returned, Malika and Tahir followed him to another part of the village. They stopped in front of a hut and the policeman called out a name, waiting until a woman emerged from inside. She stood in the shade at the doorway, her arms folded. The policeman took off his hat and wiped his balding head with his handkerchief.

'Peace to you, cousin,' he said.

'And to you,' she said. 'It has been a long time. Why do you come to visit me now?'

'I have a favour to ask.' He turned to the children.

The woman followed his gaze and looked back at him. 'Two children is more than a favour, cousin.' She turned to a young woman who had emerged from the next hut. 'Fetch some water, Nadia. They will be thirsty.' She turned back to the policeman. 'Even one child is costly, Razzaq.'

'They are old enough to work. They will work hard. They are good children.'

She looked at the children again and her eyes narrowed. 'They are not of the same blood.'

'No.'

'What happened?'

'A bus accident in the mountains east of here. God looks after his own. Their parents were not lucky.'

The woman's eye dwelled on the boy's white jubba. 'He is Muslim,' she said.

'He will change.'

'We will see.'

The policeman smiled and wiped his head again. 'There is a small problem with the girl, cousin. She has not spoken since the accident.'

The woman stepped across to Malika, held a finger beneath her chin and looked into her eyes. Malika looked back. The woman's eyes were dark; not hard, but without humour. She missed her mother's face.

'When was this accident?' the woman asked.

'A month ago.'

The woman turned to him. 'She is pretty. She will survive. Has no one called for them?'

'We have contacted the boy's family. But it was a love marriage and the family see the accident as kismet. They say his lot has been ordained.'

'And the girl?'

'Unusual. No family other than the parents.'

'That is kismet also, cousin. What do you want from me? You have not come from the city with them merely to talk.'

'You have longed for children, cousin.'

'My husband is dead. How can I provide for two growing children?'

'They can work. They will provide for themselves.'

'The girl has no dowry.'

'I will do what I can.'

The woman scoffed. 'You have two daughters of your own. How can you provide another dowry on a policeman's salary?'

'I know what it is to have daughters, cousin. I will do what I can.'

'The boy will rebel.'

'The girl is Christian. They need a home. It is not forever.'

'You say that, but no one has come forward.'

'Not yet.'

'No, not yet.'

Nadia brought water and the woman sat them beneath a vine canopy that hung between the two huts. As the policeman and the children drank, she squatted in the shade, sipping her own cup and looking deeply in front of her.

'How many summers have they seen, cousin?' she asked at one point.

'For the boy, we think twelve,' he responded. 'It is harder to know for the girl. Perhaps the same.'

Keeping her gaze on the ground, she sniffed in reply.

Finally, she turned her head. 'A month,' she said, fixing her cousin with a stare. 'I cannot afford longer. I am sorry for their plight, but we have many mouths here as it is.'

The policeman smiled and nodded. 'May good fortune find you, cousin.'

The policeman waved to them from the dray that would take him back to the station two hours down the track. He said he would send money.

'It will be needed,' the woman said.

She talked to the children on the walk back to her hut.

'You are mine, now,' she said. 'I am a good woman. I will not beat you if you do what I say. I will care for you, but you must help for the good of the village. I do not know of your past lives. They are over. Here, we must survive. We have crops in the field that need to be worked and animals that need to be tended.'

'I am Muslim,' said Tahir.

'Your past life is over,' she repeated. 'We must work together to survive. Your family has not come forward to claim you and you must do what you can to survive.'

'I am Muslim,' he said again and turned away.

Malika looked at the woman and the woman stared back. 'I am Ayesha,' she said.

Malika said nothing. It was important to say nothing. If words slipped out, memories might slip in. She wanted to be away, just away. The policeman had not let her see her parents' bodies. Malika had wanted to, but perhaps it was better he did not let her. This way she could believe that one day her parents would return. They could come now, to the village, to take her back to her own village in the hills, where clear streams fed trees that erupted in the summer with leaves and fruit. It was a game she played some days until the sun was low in the sky. But always the game ended as night came.

'Come,' said Ayesha, holding out her hand when they reached her hut. 'It is time to eat lunch. Then you must work. In a month you will be gone from here.'

A month passed and no word came from the policeman. Three months. Ayesha knew no one would come. Malika had begun to talk, at least a word here and there, mainly in response to the woman's kindness: a thank you for extra rice or a goodnight as they lay together on the bed. One night after working the fields, she collapsed on the earthen floor inside the hut and began to cry. Ayesha stayed with her during the night, stroking her skin and bathing her forehead. She told Malika no one could change the past, no matter how unjust. Everyone must do what they could. When the first birds chirped and the sky lightened, Ayesha lay down next to Malika and began to snore. Malika looked across the room to Tahir. He too had stayed awake during the night, at one point turning his face to the wall and covering his ears.

The men called to collect the children for work soon after the first sun crept across the lane. Ayesha said they needed rest, but the boy rose from his bed to join the men in the fields. Malika woke late and helped prepare dinner at the fire. In the afternoon, Ayesha brought out her dowry chest, a large tin box. Tin to keep out rats, she explained, adding that it had cost her father a month of labour. Her parents had hoped for a large family from her; they had given her clothes and vestments for baptisms and first communions.

'But,' she said, 'the Lord took my husband young, barely a year into our marriage.' She smiled at Malika. 'Now my parents are gone, I am too old for children, and my dowry box is without purpose.'

Malika looked at her. 'My mother had a dowry box also,' she said. 'It is gone now.'

The woman nodded. 'It is good to hear you speak,' she said.

Later, Malika made tea and they sipped the warm, sweet liquid as the fire glowed and the light outside faded. As they drank, Ayesha reached into her glory box for a parcel wrapped in muslin cloth. She opened it to show fabric and needles, with reels of cotton and scissors of different sizes.

'Do you know how to sew?' she asked.

Malika nodded. She took a piece of fine cotton and a patch of material from the basket and showed the woman the cross-stitching her mother had taught her. Her fingers played deftly with the needle, first on one and then the other side of the fabric. She completed a pattern and showed Ayesha, who could see it was beyond the skill of the village. It would sell for a good price.

That night, Ayesha took her ideas to the elders in the village. She showed them Malika's stitching and spoke to them of profits. It was resolved that the girl would no longer work in the fields. She would mix with the village girls, learn to work in the animal pens, wash clothes and organise food lists. Twice a week, she would teach the girls her craft.

The next Monday, well after the men had picked up Tahir, as morning light spread across the land, Ayesha took Malika to meet some of the village girls and young women beneath the fig tree in the square. They became interested when Ayesha showed them Malika's stitching. Rolling out a ream of cotton cloth to protect against the dust, they sat around her in a circle and the session began. It was a slow process; their hands were not as agile as Malika's. She would hold their fingers and patiently guide them across the fabric, talking as she did,

explaining what they were trying to achieve.

She had mixed little with the village girls until then: the older girls had tolerated rather than welcomed her and the younger girls were busy with their own games. Now though, some of the girls began to linger outside her hut in the mornings and accompany her to the centre square. They waited for her when the clothes needed to be washed, walking beside her to the creek beyond the rail line, smiling and shyly touching her skin. Sometimes she would smile back and at night, as she lay next to Ayesha, the grey blanket that covered her life carried a little less weight.

Malika slowly settled into village life: the morning smells of barley porridge in the smoky hut as the weather cooled, the shared pleasures of an evening breeze in the square, eating goat's cheese and listening to the choir sing after Mass on the last Sunday of the month, when the priest would visit. She knew which small avenues afforded the best shade and which dogs to avoid. But it was not her home. It was a place to rest as she waited for life to bring another change. She knew the truth of what the visiting priest called Limbo, the home for lost souls. And as memories of her past life became more distant, so too did they become more accessible. Sometimes, she would even welcome them.

One day Fatima, one of the sewing class girls, brought a bag of sweets. Her mother had bought the sweets at the bazaar for her birthday, and told her to share them among the other girls to ensure good fortune stayed with her for the year to come. Fatima stood the girls in a line and handed out the sweets, one at a time. When she reached the end, she turned and began

to work her way back. The bag was large, and Malika saw the process would be slow. She tapped Fatima on the shoulder and, taking the bag from her, told her to count the girls while she began to count the sweets.

'How many?' she asked Fatima, when she herself had finished counting.

'Twenty-two.'

'And a hundred and seventy-eight sweets,' Malika answered after a minute. She thought a moment. 'How many did you not already give two sweets to?'

The girl turned and counted back from the end of the line. 'Seven. And then there's you,' she added.

'And how many did you want?'

Fatima blushed. 'It is my twelfth birthday.' She hesitated. 'It is customary here –'

Malika nodded. 'To have one for each year.' It had been the same at her home.

Fatima nodded. 'But everyone else?'

The answer appeared in Malika's mind like a warm glow. 'Make sure each girl has nine sweets.'

'And you?'

She shrugged. 'I will have what is left.'

Fatima held the bag high and the other girls gathered, first for their sweets but then around Malika. They looked at her as if she were a wise man or an elder, pleading with her to show them how such tricks could be done. They took her across to the base of the tree, and needlework was forgotten as they sat on the cotton ream and Malika spoke to them of arithmetic and the games that numbers could be made to play.

When their mothers and the day's chores called, Fatima came to Malika, a smile curling her lips, her hands behind her back. 'How many sweets did you think would be left?' she teased.

'I thought five.'

Fatima shrugged as she handed across two. 'I wanted to save you more, but Rashida took the others for her brother.' She held out the bag. 'It is no matter. You can have some of mine.'

Malika shook her head. 'Perhaps the boy is sick.'

'I know she took them for herself,' said Fatima, pulling the bag inside her clothes. She glanced at Malika and hid a smile behind her hand. 'How will she find a husband? She is already as big as a water buffalo.'

'Perhaps she will marry a nice fat boy buffalo,' said Malika, and Fatima giggled.

As she walked back to Ayesha's home, Malika wondered if her parents – in whatever place they were – would be pleased with her. She wanted to tell them that she was making friends and helping the village, that she honoured what they had taught her. She needed to tell them about her day, from when she first opened her eyes in the morning to what she saw in her dreams at night. She forced herself to think of the morning and of the girls' faces as she explained how numbers fitted together. Numbers had always come easily to her. Even as a small girl, still too young for school, she had helped the older children understand the secrets they held. Later, she didn't need the formulas the teacher taught in the classroom. She could look at the numbers and the answer would appear in her mind. As she tried to explain to her mother once, it was like seeing them

as different colours.

The following morning, some of the girls brought paper and pencils to the square, arriving with them clutched in their hands.

'It is better we do our stitching first,' said Malika.

The next night, she lay awake in bed wondering what to tell them, where to start. She wished she had a book to help her. She could feel Tahir listening in the darkness from the other corner as she turned and fidgeted beside Ayesha's warm body. She hid her fears beneath her clothes as she dressed in the morning, and then set the fire for chapattis. In the end, she made a decision to start with arithmetic, although she remembered only a few of the laws and formulas her teacher had begun to show her. She half hoped they would forget about the number games, but after a token effort with their stitching the girls wrapped their handiwork in cloth and placed their packages at the base of the tree before gathering around her. Malika took a deep breath and began.

After some weeks, Malika resorted to writing down number problems at night, so there was something for the class to start with during the day. Sometimes, Tahir stared at her in the faint glow of the kerosene lamp, his dark eyes flashing. He asked her once, in a whisper so Ayesha would not wake, what she was doing.

'It is a game for the other girls,' Malika whispered back.

'Games are for children,' he said, and rolled over to the wall. Minutes later, she heard him snoring. For a few moments, they were in time with Ayesha's loud snorts, and Malika lowered her head and smiled.

In the class, she began to recite numbers, forcing the girls to remember them in sequence, and giving them simple problems to work out in their heads. It didn't seem to matter what she did or which tasks she set, the girls were always on time, bubbling with excitement and eager for the next lesson. Soon, they would not leave until their mothers came looking for them, and some walked around the village reciting their tables or explaining division and multiplication to their brothers.

One day, the elders called Malika to an evening meeting. Ayesha stood behind her as she explained her lessons to the circle of stone-faced elders. Ayesha stayed when Malika was asked to walk home. The next morning, Ayesha told her that the elders had banned the classes.

Malika ate her breakfast slowly and later that morning spoke to Fatima at the latrine.

'We must continue our work,' Fatima said. She directed the hose at the concrete gutter and waited as Malika followed with the broom.

'They could make things worse,' said Malika. 'They might stop our stitching, too.' She paused her sweeping to take a breath then, holding it, she shoved the excrement into the bucket at the end of the gutter. She exhaled. 'We should be careful.'

'That is true,' Fatima nodded.

Malika leaned on the broom. 'I have an idea. We have paper and pencils. We can pass problems between us. So we do not gather together, except for stitching. I could make up a code.' Her face became doubtful. 'Perhaps it is too dangerous.'

Fatima's face beamed. 'No! That is a good idea, my friend. It

can be our own secret code.'

'We will need to be careful of displeasing the elders.'

'What of Ayesha? She is almost an elder.'

'She will not mind,' said Malika.

One Sunday, the priest arrived early for Mass. He manoeuvred his small, red car along the largest of the lanes and parked it at the edge of the square, beneath a branch of the fig tree. He stood for a moment, his hands on his hips, and then wandered over to where the children worked on their sewing. One of the mothers now supervised the children to make sure they worked. The priest gazed at the gathering before smiling at the woman.

'May I speak with them?' he said to the woman, who ordered the girls to lay down their work.

The priest was easily the tallest man that Malika had seen, taller even than the policeman. His hair was red like autumn leaves. His accent spoke of foreign lands as he told them of the child Jesus visiting the temple, and how his holiness was visible even then, even by those who didn't believe. Malika had heard the story before. She glanced at Fatima, who had been working on a puzzle that Malika had given her that morning as they threw grain to the chickens. Fatima nudged the girl next to her and slipped a folded sheet of paper in her hand. The girl waited until the priest had turned away before leaning across to Malika. But she was not careful enough and the woman saw the folded paper in the girl's hand.

'What nonsense are you making, Lubna?' she hissed. She stepped between the girls and snatched the note from the

open-mouthed girl, before burying it in her clothes.

'What is that?' the priest asked.

'It is foolishness,' said the woman. 'A foolishness the elders have forbidden.'

'May I see it?'

The woman hesitated but then did as he asked, looking at Malika with malice as she handed it across. He scanned the note for a minute, then looked up. 'Who wrote this?' he asked.

Malika stood and he beckoned her forward as he read the note again, this time frowning.

'What is it?' he asked finally, looking in her eyes.

'It is a puzzle,' she answered.

'They are lines without meaning.'

She took the paper. 'No, it is a code,' she said. 'Each line is a different number. We are deciding what the size the square would need to be if all the harvest from the field had to be stored here, if it reached the same height as the wall.'

'The elders have forbidden it, Father,' said the woman again, staring at the seated children. She clutched at her robes. 'We must work, not play idly.'

The priest held up his hand and turned back to Malika. His eyes narrowed. 'And what is the answer?'

'The others are working on it,' said Malika, looking around. 'I do not want to spoil it.'

The priest laughed. 'Perhaps that is because you do not know it.'

'Three and a quarter chains on each side,' she said immediately, looking at him.

'How do you know?'

'I saw the answer when Tahir told me they hope to fill three silos this year.'

'But the silos are round.'

'Cylinders. Yes.'

He leaned forward, his hands on his knees. 'My name is Father Louis Andreas Salvador Prader.' He smiled when she hesitated. 'My friends call me Father Louis.'

'Then I will do that,' said Malika. The girls were behind her, she knew, but none of them had moved. She felt the woman's anger at her back too. Father Louis seemed about to talk again before changing his mind. He handed back the note. 'You say you saw the answer. Do you mean you calculated it?'

She shook her head.

'Then tell me how you explain it to the other girls.'

'I do not know how. I see it, then I work it out as I explain it.'

'Sit with me,' he said. 'Let us spend some time together.' He spoke to the woman. 'Rasheed, please, could you make me some tea? I will watch the children.'

That afternoon, after Mass, Father Louis spent time talking with the elders in the large building that served as the church on the Sundays he was there. It was a long discussion. As she always did on such days, Malika relaxed with the women and girls in the square, but on this day she had to try hard to ignore what was happening inside the church. She ate the late lunch, drank tea and made jokes, laughing at the young children as they ran around chasing each other. Older boys had begun a game of cricket on the other side of the tree. While she sat, her eyes kept drifting to the path she knew Tahir would take to the square. He was not forced to come to Mass, and instead

usually worked in the fields in the morning.

He arrived grasping a scythe, his slender limbs now strong with muscle from the field work. His skin glowed in the afternoon sun. He had long grown out of his *jubba*, and wore the same grey top and pants as the others. But the village barely saw him outside the Sunday meal, and even then he would take food from the table and either sit alone or occasionally find shade with a few of the older boys from the field and watch the activities in silence. Tahir did not mix; the whole village knew that. Sometimes though, she knew he looked at her, especially when she was looking anywhere but at him.

Long shadows had formed across the square by the time the priest came out of the hut. He walked across to Malika. 'I think we have an understanding,' he said.

She looked up. Sweat moistened his face, as if he had been working under the sun. His shirt was wet too, with an acrid odour that caught the breeze.

'Treat Father with respect, girl,' scolded Ayesha, pushing her to her feet.

'You must stop the teaching,' Father Louis said, gazing into her face.

She nodded. In the corner of her eye Fatima was pretending not to listen.

'You will not teach,' he continued, 'but I will bring you books on the Sundays I take Mass, so I can teach you.'

'I can learn alone.'

'Mathematics, perhaps. But you might find English more difficult.'

'What is English?'

'Another language.' He smiled, showing many large teeth. 'You will see.'

'And Fatima?'

'I'm sorry.' He shook his head. 'The elders will not relent.'