

The  
Things  
We See  
in the  
Light

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**PANTERA  
PRESS**

# Chapter 1

*The ending of a relationship will always make you question the beginning.*

If every group has their archetypes – the cool one, the dreamer, the beauty – I’m the boring one. I have one talent: food. My best friend, Samira, is the imaginative dreamer; her cousin Lara is the life-loving wild one. While my friends had growing pains, I suffered a crushing social phobia. I wrapped it up in piety. But I was never racked with the same worries as my friends. You need to have desires and goals to be anxious about how your life’s turning out.

These thoughts flood my mind as I approach the front gate of Lara’s apartment block under a blanket of light rain. Uncertainty flows through me, and I suddenly feel self-conscious about my unexpected arrival. If there’s anyone likely to appreciate spontaneity, it’s Lara, but my body is tense, my nerves tightened like a thousand tiny bows. Seeing her again feels bigger than the choice I made to return home.

I drop my small piece of luggage onto the concrete, stained wet by the rain. There’s a flat number on the brick pillar and I squint at it in the dim light of a crescent moon. On my phone screen is an email Lara sent last year: a promise to send her a

package from Jordan. I double-check the address, then look up again. It's the right place.

Before I can further question the wisdom of my arrival, I walk to the front door, pulsing with renewed intention. The apartment block looks weathered but not ancient. It's only four storeys high. The glass door is framed by white wooden panels, the kind that were everywhere in the 1980s. When I discover that the intercom is busted, I'm filled with relief. I wipe my hands down the sides of my thighs, examine them briefly, then grip the thick silver doorknob like it's a lifeline.

It's several flights up to Lara's door. I knock once, then again a few seconds later. Eventually I hear murmurs, then the door swings open and I crane my neck upwards to meet the gaze of a man. He's familiar, but it takes me a moment to place him. Pensive expression. Broad-shouldered and bearded.

'Hakeem?'

The man frowns, concerned. 'Yes?'

He doesn't recognise me. We both look different. Hakeem still bears the markings of the stern, bearded recluse I once knew, but he now has a lighter sprinkling of facial hair, more hipster than 'fundy', as Lara used to call him.

As for me, my headscarf used to fall nearly to my ankles – nothing like the gypsy-style scarf that crowns my head now, exposing my chin and leaving room for small gold earrings and the gold necklace I always wear.

Hakeem and I barely used to interact, both well-versed in lowering our gazes. But now I search his face for clues, or comfort; confirmation, perhaps, that if he has changed, it's not so ridiculous how much I have too.

'I'm Sahar. Lara and Samira's friend?'

Recognition registers on Hakeem's face just as Lara steps into the room behind him, jangling a few coins and asking

about dinner. She does a double-take, then covers her mouth in alarm before rushing towards me.

‘Bloody hell!’

I want to cry – with relief and anger and shame all at once. I feel like a stranger in a foreign country, although this is my home. But even after everything that’s happened, one look at Lara and I feel safe. It’s the oddest feeling, and I can’t explain it at all.



Hakeem commences a quiet exit just as dinner arrives.

‘Sorry,’ I mutter. ‘You don’t need to go.’ The sentiment isn’t reflected in my voice or my words. But Hakeem, a bit awkward and shy, leaves with a smile and a hand to the chest.

Lara pushes me onto the sofa then follows him to the door. My face warms at the thought of the embrace they must be sharing, and I feel the weight of breaking them apart, even if it’s only for one evening.

The door closes and Lara yells out, ‘Stay where you are.’ Then, ‘You must be starving,’ she continues from another room, and there’s the sound of kitchen clattering. I have missed her voice, her hybrid Australian–English accent.

‘Not really. I had something on the plane.’

Crackers and cheese. I didn’t have the stomach for more.

While I wait, I grow curious about how Lara lives. On the wall beside the hallway entrance is a painting in broad brushstrokes of an Arab woman – a red *keffiyeh* scarf sitting loosely around her shoulders – with voluminous black hair and piercing brown eyes. She stares into the distance, not looking at her audience. The main wall presents a startling portrait of Lara and her band onstage, spotlights spraying white light above

them. Lara stands out with her wild mane of hair, tight black pants and sparkly blue top, her eyes closed as she sings into a microphone. Large, dangly earrings complete the look. Below the picture, resting on the floor, is a guitar case.

Lara has grown up. Or perhaps, simply, into a better version of herself. She was never someone who needed a lot of things, only experiences, even if they could be emotionally explosive. That's what she liked – to smash into things.

My face flushes at my silent assessment of Lara as she plods back into the room carrying plates, cutlery and glasses.

'You look so different,' she says, beaming at me, then she indicates to the photograph of her onstage. 'Samira took that; clever thing.' She lays out a floral Mexican oil cloth – the kind our mothers always used to cover our dining tables. 'Wog mat!' She laughs. 'I'm so grown up now. It's disgusting.'

Lara serves up a slice of pizza for me. 'Vegetarian, don't worry.'

I smile gratefully. It's been years since I've had to think about food as *halal* or not. In Jordan, everything was halal, and I long ago stopped worrying about it. 'Anything is fine, thank you.'

A short silence follows as we negotiate plates and napkins. Lara twists open the lid of a bottle of sparkling water and starts to pour.

'So, how long do I have to wait before I ask what you're doing here?' she says. The lightness in her eyes fades as she hands me the glass of water.

'A while longer.'

'But you're all right?'

'I'm fine. I'll tell you everything, but not tonight. Is that OK?'

Lara responds with a smile. 'Of course.' A few moments later, she ventures, 'Is there anything you want to ask me?' Her eyes are bright with the desire to share information.

‘How serious is it with Hakeem?’

Lara pours herself a drink. ‘He’s my person, I guess.’

‘Is he your ... *engaged to you* person?’

‘We’re somewhere between dating and engaged.’

‘Between?’

‘It’s complicated.’

Lara seems uncomfortable with the truth of her connection with Hakeem, like she’s wearing the wrong-sized shirt and is puzzled that it doesn’t fit.

‘Are you disappointed that you fell for a Muslim?’ I ask.

‘No, just surprised.’

We eat in silence for a moment, then Lara breaks out into a grin. ‘So, tell me: when did you get so trendy? I barely recognised you.’

‘Hardly trendy, Lara.’ I glance down to inspect my clothing. A knit top over black jeans. Fair enough. These clothes hug my body, rather than surround it. This current version of me is the sweet spot my husband, Khaled, favoured – conservative but not religious. Shorter headscarves, some jewellery, a dab of blush and a stroke of eyeliner.

‘At least we’ve moved past the *hajjeh* look,’ Lara says. ‘You’re wearing an actual top over jeans instead of those wraparound dresses that practically went down to your ankles. Lordy.’

‘No, please. Tell me what you really think.’

‘Frumplestiltskin.’

‘OK, OK.’ But a smile creeps across my face.

‘I think you would have worn an *abaya* everywhere, if you actually went out at all.’ Lara covers her mouth as she negotiates a bite of pizza. ‘But there’s something else, too.’

‘I’m a bit thinner,’ I say, reaching for a slice of pizza. ‘It makes me look taller.’

I try to remember at what stage of my evolution she last saw me. Was my skin already darker from years of exposure to the unforgiving Middle Eastern sun? I'm far from 'cherubic', as Samira used to describe me. Now I'm considered gaunt, with more pronounced cheekbones.

'Not that,' she says, shaking her head. 'Your energy is different. And you're still a shorty.'

I'm starting to feel embarrassed, but Lara is oblivious to my burning cheeks. I take a bite of pizza and close my eyes, allowing my tastebuds to awaken.

'You're calmer,' she says. 'I mean, not that you were ever loud. But you were ...'

'Intense. I know.'

'Especially about religious stuff.'

I offer my agreement with a shrug.

'Have you spoken to Samira?' Lara leans closer. 'And your brother! Does he know you're here?'

'No. Not yet.' My whole body shifts as I tense up. I am reminded that this home I return to is incomplete. My parents are gone. My brother, Salim, is the one remaining link.

Seeing Lara's worry, I try to loosen my response. 'Please, just give me a minute to settle in.'

Lara's expression turns swiftly to remorse. 'Oh my God, of course. I'm sorry.' She reaches over and gives my knee a squeeze.

'It's OK. It's just, my husband doesn't even know where I am yet.'

Lara's eyes widen. She openly processes her shock before pinning me with an enquiring look. 'Babe, I know you're not ready to talk right now, but are you OK?'

I nod, relieved when she doesn't press me further.

I left Sydney in search of a happily ever after, but I didn't return home to find one. When I think about it, survival is

what has always motivated me. I am a practical person, not a romantic one.

It explains so much now.



A couple of hours later, I wrestle with sleep beside Lara in her large bed. We're sharing tonight; she insisted, and I agreed without argument. Lara embraced me like a favourite teddy bear as she fell easily into slumber. Half an hour later, I extricate myself, reassured by her steady breathing that she is fast asleep, perhaps already travelling in dreams.

I try to get comfortable. The mattress is soft, but it's not mine and my body rebels against the unfamiliar. The trance-like state that brought me home has faded, and the nerves are evolving into full-blown anxiety, plucking at my insides – a warning shot that something terrible is going to happen, even though the worst has already occurred.

I haven't checked my phone since leaving Jordan. Something for tomorrow, not tonight. I close my eyes again and again, and each time, his face appears. Tonight, I'm lucky. It's not the ending but the beginning that comes to me in flashes.

Before the memories plunge me into proper sorrow, I slow my breathing. I need to occupy myself without delay. I need work to busy my hands. I need to find a place to live, to create my own space.

I need to forget.

# Jordan

## *The first year*

I can't get used to the heat. It's thick and suffocating, wrapped around me but also moving through me. Sometimes, it feels like it's burning my skin and I wonder if this is what hell would be like. Not even the cotton of my headscarf brings relief; I can only find that indoors, in the chilled embrace of rooms running the AC twenty-four seven.

It's odd how this is what makes me feel so far from home – not the strangers I must get to know, or the husband who studies me like he is also wondering how I landed here. Khaled is too good-looking for me, far too Arab, and I am too Muslim. I saw this quickly, but we're still finding our rhythm, so I try not to be offended when he laughs at my conservatism or when he is casual about faith. We will get there, I tell myself, even as anxiety crowds my body.

I still myself, but nothing can be done about the weather, the air, the frantic pace of a city throbbing with activity, the cacophony of sounds from the streets outside that dim only in the early hours of the morning. Everything here erupts into life after eight pm.

I could retreat to the kitchen, but even that feels strange and hollow. In Sydney, the kitchen was my work and meeting place; an expansive, sunlit space that held me, that carried the stories of my friends. Here, although the kitchen is large, it's long and narrow, with a small window that only just manages to throw a shard of light into the room. Whenever I use it, I feel like I'm trapped in a maze, and when I turn this way and that, I am met by emptiness in every direction.

One evening, after I complain mildly about how big the villa is for just two people, Khaled mistakes my meaning and offers to get us a maid. The idea mortifies me.

'A lot of people have maids here. It's no big deal,' he says. 'But if you think you can manage without one, *inti horra*.' He says that a lot. *Inti horra*. You are free.

We occupy a handsome villa. Khaled's family has wealth, and great respect. They are classy and kind. The house is Khaled's, the outcome of years spent in the Gulf working at high-end engineering firms. 'I didn't waste any time,' he had told me during our engagement. He has achieved a lot for a thirty-seven-year-old. The villa is no small thing: modern and spacious, it sits below the mountains. No crowded hilltops and big families occupying three-storey flats for Khaled's family.

My in-laws, Im and Abu Naeem fret over me. My father-in-law, whom I address as *ammi*, takes the seat at the end of the table when we dine out in large, noisy restaurants – the quintessential patriarch who enjoys his high status. He never lets me cook for him. I learned not to take this personally. He just likes eating out, to be taken care of by others, for his family to be taken care of by waiters.

I've been here nearly six months. At first, Khaled made it seem like this was a transitional phase of moving on to the next stage, but it's clear this is not temporary.

On a family trip to Jordan two years ago, I knew my parents hoped I would meet someone. I acquiesced to the pressure of our less religious family to attend a wedding. My cousins insisted on making me over. They good-naturedly giggled at my clothing ('Like my mum's aunties!'), and the length of my headscarves (something about bedsheets). When I refused to uncover for the evening, they transformed me into an unknown and uncomfortable – and to my mind, temporary – version of me. I wore make-up, and they didn't overdo the bright colours.

I looked different and so everything else about me shifted. My shyness was interpreted as sly confidence. Arabs love to say '*shayfa halha*'. She's up herself. That's what they thought of me, and that's what attracted Khaled to me. When the aunts told me he was enquiring about me the next day, I felt an unfamiliar flutter.

It was a tentative yet swift courtship, but it is only now that I am getting to know my husband. Somehow, I had believed that our interactions by phone – calls and texts – were a worthy exploration. They weren't. He is different to how I pictured him, even if on the outside he is the same: handsome, masculine, confident. He is a good son, a good brother. He knows how to talk, though I never feel truly connected to him. I am realistic enough to know that love, if it comes at all, must be developed and earned. But too often, I feel as if I am one of his responsibilities.

We have edged into a scalding summer. Everyone jokes about the weather – you can do that when you're used to it. Better than the cutting winter I arrived in. We joked about that, too – how I shouldn't take it as a bad sign that I arrived in Amman the same day as a rare snowstorm.

Now that the weather is better, Khaled's family keep me busy while he travels for work. We sample the famous *felafel* in downtown Amman. We eat sweets at stores bursting with

delicacies. They ferry me to ancient sites – the Roman Steps and Jerash. Despite being too old and tired to navigate these places themselves, my in-laws want to show me the beauty of Amman.

The family had gifted me with half a kilo of gold as a dowry; the heavy, yellow kind made up of thick chains and elaborate designs. Some afternoons, I sit with the jewellery, strangely in awe because they don't match me. But they are elegant, and my sister-in-law Zainab expects me to wear them as a new wife. The nicest piece is a thin gold bangle given to me by Khaled's younger sister, Dina, and I don't mind the small hoop earrings from Khaled. But the piece I come to treasure is the pendant with my name in Arabic calligraphy.

'You see, *habibti*,' Khaled says to me, 'everyone has contributed something. You are our family now.'

## Chapter 2

*Every day I paint my skull with the memories.*

In Lara's small kitchen, I search for ingredients. I'm wearing my favourite red, *dishdasha* a long, embroidered dress our Arab mums customarily wore around the house.

The cupboards are poorly stocked, and the fridge contains only a handful of paltry offerings. I locate a bag of bread that has lost its freshness, but on quick inspection, I see it has no green spots. There are some eggs, a tub of hummus, a slab of haloumi cheese and a soft cucumber that will have to do. From the freezer, I fish out a bag of sausages. Beside the toaster is a bottle of Palestinian olive oil, one month short of expiry.

I fry up the cheese, then cook the meat in a different pan. Warmed by the familiar smells and sounds, I spoon out hummus into a bowl and drizzle olive oil over it, then toast the bread over a naked flame on the stove.

Lara enters just as I'm switching off the gas. 'Look at you, *hajjah*,' she jokes, appraising my *dishdasha*. 'You haven't changed in the essentials.' Then she sees what I have prepared and looks like she might cry. 'Oh, I miss real food. I miss your cooking.'

I smile, immediately transported. Lara and Samira in my parents' kitchen, eating the endless supply of creations

I would make – trials and experiments for my cake business: muffins, tarts, cakes and Arabic food better than my mother's dishes. In Amman, I missed my kitchen and the shape of the conversations that filled it. The invisible energy that floated between the women in my circle, keeping us together, making us feel whole, even when life threw us challenges. If I close my eyes, I am there again, bathed in the innocence and simplicity of another time; the fragrant smells of sauces and spices, the sound of cooking mixed with peals of laughter and stories.

Lara envelops me in a genuine embrace, her eyes shut tight. I remain still, uncertain, yet to let go, and allow her warmth to thaw me out. When she releases me, she goes in search of plates and condiments. Then she makes coffee. 'One thing I *can* do for you.'

As we sit down to eat, Lara places a cup of coffee in front of me, the foam topped with a dusting of cocoa in the shape of a heart. She bats her lashes. 'Aren't I talented?' Then she tilts her head to the side and studies me. 'You feeling well rested?'

I nod. 'I feel like I've been out for three days.'

'Closer to two.'

'What? That's not possible.'

'You arrived Tuesday night. It's Thursday.'

'God. Sorry.'

'You needed it. I just had to check that you were still breathing.'

Lara eats like a woman starved. 'Sorry about the lack of food,' she says between mouthfuls. 'I've been away, and I haven't done a proper shop. Food on tour is crap. Really bad for you.' She pinches her hips. She was always curvaceous and I can't decipher a great difference in her body. Perhaps she is slightly fuller, but as beautiful as ever.

'You don't look any different to me,' I tell her.

I take a sip of the coffee, immediately responsive to the bitter flavour. But the milk is a shock to my system. In Jordan, the milk was sweeter, usually condensed. I took to making a pot of aromatic Turkish coffee every morning, slavish to its comforting effects on me.

‘I’m not sure how to behave around a rock star,’ I say.

Lara snorts. ‘Gawd. I’m not even close to being a star.’ But I can sense the wish at the end of the sentence.

‘You seem to be doing well.’

Lara nods, scraping up the remaining hummus on her plate with a piece of bread. ‘I love it. It’s like coming home. It’s like ... do you know that feeling of relief when something just ... fits?’

‘Uh-huh.’ I ache at the memories of the things that ‘fit’.

‘So, I have an idea,’ Lara says. ‘I was thinking we could take a walk around the neighbourhood later. There are loads of bakeries and specialty cafes. This is hipster central. Maybe you’ll be inspired.’

‘Inspired to do what?’

‘I figure you’ll be wanting to restart your cake business. If you’re staying a while, that is?’

‘I’m back for good. But I’m not sure about the business.’ My words hit me like a blunt knife.

‘There’s one particular place I want to take you to,’ Lara continues. ‘Sweets by Maggie. It’s a dessert cafe with a little chocolate shop next door.’

The idea lands softly in my gut. ‘That might be nice,’ I say, my enthusiasm mild but growing.

‘Maggie’s kind of a big hit in the neighbourhood. All the social media geeks line up for her cakes every weekend. She’s been around for a few years, but some influencer got hold of one of her cakes and Maggie took off.’ Lara assesses me. ‘Do you think you’re up to it?’

‘Of course.’ I rise from my seat, already feeling overwhelmed, and start clearing the table to hide my expression. I’m in Sydney again. It should feel like home.

Then a sound splinters my thoughts and I look up to see Lara has dropped a key onto the kitchen table.

‘It’s a spare,’ she says. ‘Come and go as you please.’

‘Lara, I don’t know what to say.’

She rises from the table and downs the rest of her coffee. ‘You don’t have to say anything. You have no idea how happy I am to see you.’

I know she means it. I can see that, somehow, I’m a lighthouse to her, just as she is to me. With the familiar, we don’t feel so alone.



Lara’s suburb of Newtown is nestled in the inner west, an area of Sydney home to warehouses and wogs. Despite some upgrades, it’s immediately apparent that its 1970s faded charm is part of its modern appeal. It has a worn-out quality, but it’s clearly been revived by hipsters who recycle and favour retro settings. Beyond the apartments and houses lies the main street, filled with corner pubs, clothing stores, restaurants and cafes. The network of streets and outlets has a grimy quality. I see a tea shop and a store selling crystals and mystical wonder at eighty dollars an hour. We bypass shops with trendy clothing and leather handbags and only slow down for the food establishments.

I marvel at how comfortable and easy it feels to be here when this used to be the type of area our parents never allowed us to frequent as young women. Newtown was famous for its assortment of oddballs, misfits and people in various states of

human confusion. I smile at the thought that Lara found her way here. Life gets it right sometimes.

Suddenly, a wave of reassurance moves through my body. I am meant to be here, walking these streets. There is something waiting for me, ready to burst into life.

I ogle a Japanese café with specialty matcha offerings. Beside it is a shop with tall cakes that show a clear signature style of marbled glazed surfaces and elaborate chocolate decorations. I file it away with a spark of interest as Lara forces me to keep moving. A few doors down, we come to a stop outside the café Lara mentioned, Sweets by Maggie. I peer through the window and see a jungle of bodies, some in a queue, others seated at a mess of tables and chairs. Beside the café is a chocolate shop, a hole-in-the-wall that is distinctive for its small window and gold lettering, which spells out the name: Small and Sweet by Maggie. It is strangely out of place but also exactly where it should be.

‘Sweets first,’ Lara says, steering me towards the café entrance. She pushes the door open and we are hit by the din of a space teeming with customers. We make our way through in search of a place to sit. It’s a tiny shop, no bigger than an apartment, with small wooden tables packed together and a decent-sized display fridge. Lara flies over to a couple vacating a table in the far corner and we secure the spot. Then she dashes off to make some selections. I guard the table, trying to identify the contents of the fridge from a distance; I can see cakes, tarts, pastries and doughnuts.

A few minutes later, Lara places an assortment of desserts down before me. ‘Coffee’s coming,’ she says as she takes her seat then crosses her arms in anticipation. She knows this is a language in which I’m fluent, and these desserts are impressive. There’s a level of mastery to their design and structure. A chocolate dome looks robust, the chocolate thick and smooth,

the surface shiny. Gold dusting and a sampling of raspberries adorn it. I suspect it will be bliss. Beside the dome is a vegan salted-caramel doughnut, glossy and enticing. There's a mille-feuille, plump with fresh layers of custard between flaky pastry, in some ways similar to the ones I used to make, but this one is topped with a luxuriously thick vanilla icing and gold leaf. Finally, an elegant panna cotta in a dome shape, infused with vanilla bean and topped with mint leaves and raspberry. Simple but suggestive of an experience.

'The chocolate dome is Maggie's signature dish. Chocolate is her thing, obviously,' explains Lara, indicating towards the shop next door.

As I start to sample the desserts, I wake up a little. The flavours offer mini explosions, brief teases of joy. As always, my mind starts to deconstruct the ingredients and steps that went into making each one. I compare my own approaches, but I also look for the faults. I'm like an actor who can never watch a movie without thinking about how it was made; a dentist who judges everyone's teeth.

Lara watches me. 'No?' she says, sounding a bit disappointed.

'Oh no, they're lovely.' Except the panna cotta, which is too heavy and thick. 'This whole place is nice.'

'I thought you might like it. Like I said, it's pretty popular.'

'Yes. Instagram famous. I can see why.'

A waiter arrives with our coffees, dropping them onto the table so quickly that the tops slosh onto the plates. Unperturbed, Lara takes a sip of her coffee and watches as I continue with the doughnut.

'So, is this the sort of place you might want to work?'

'Maybe.' I push away the plates, suddenly full.

'OK,' Lara says, placing her coffee cup carefully onto the saucer. 'Well, I know Maggie, because I know Leo. He's a

mate, and Maggie's business partner. I think they're related, or they grew up together or something.'

'And they're hiring?'

'I don't know, but I can tell them about you.'

'I don't want a handout, Lara. I want to do this properly, if I'm going to do it at all.'

'Well, they're not going to give you a job if you can't bloody bake, are they?'

I think on this for a moment. 'I guess not.'

Lara sighs. 'Will you at least think about it? Just say the word and I'll give Leo a call.'

I nod and she breaks out into a grin and digs her spoon into the chocolate dome. She closes her eyes in rapture as she spoons some into her mouth, before widening them to a crazy size as she goes in for more. 'Oh my God. So good.'

Then her phone pings and she negotiates eating and texting, leaving me to drink my coffee while I study my surroundings. The coffee menu board reads like another language of roast origins and histories. Around me, people confidently go about their day. I watch as a woman takes a photo of her plate – an impressive, glossy lime-coloured dessert with shards of chocolate perched on top. I want to feel that ease and confidence, too. Like this is my city again, and I know my way around it. I don't know what this version of me will look like in this world, but part of me is anxious to find out, the part that wants not simply to survive but to live.

Phone abandoned, Lara speaks. 'You're so quiet. But so much is going on in that head of yours.'

I nod. 'You have no idea.'

'I want to, though.'

'I know. I just can't right now.' It all feels too large for this moment.

‘Have you even checked your messages yet?’ Lara says.

I shake my head. My phone sits heavily in my handbag.

‘OK,’ she continues, unflappable. ‘I get that you don’t want to share the full story yet, but enough with rules, Sahar. You look like you’ve loosened up a bit. Why don’t you just have some fun?’

Her words are hollow to me. I have ‘loosened up’, it’s true. But I feel lost, abandoned after a time of connection and purpose.

‘Sahar, listen. I’ve calmed down a lot. I’m not anywhere near as wild as I used to be, and Lord knows, being with Hakeem means I’m disgustingly sensible in ways that I never imagined possible. I mean, I floss for God’s sake. But I am your woman for regret: for dealing with it, and curing it. Just name your adventure.’

I don’t want to hurt Lara’s feelings. But I don’t know how to explain that what fills my thoughts when it comes to my freedom is not the stuff people usually think a woman who has left her husband must want. I don’t care about sex or a night on the town. I want solitude and space. I want to crawl into myself and out as I please while I process the path ahead.

I chuckle. ‘I don’t want to play *haram* catch-up, Lara. I’m fine.’

Lara studies me, disapproval etched into her features. ‘Babe. It’s not about giving in. It’s about experiencing. Don’t label it.’

‘What do you think is going to help me right now?’

‘I don’t know. That’s what I’m asking you to think about. You’re in control here. You lead the way. Just tell me how I can help.’

I exhale noisily. ‘OK. I need to work, to do something with my body. I’m antsy.’ Full of all these emotions and nowhere to put them.

Lara is enlivened by my admission. She taps her phone against her face, looking up at the ceiling. ‘OK. We know you can find work easily enough. The movement stuff ... why don’t you do some dancing or yoga? I did pole dancing for a while. It was pretty cool.’

I sigh and shake my head. ‘Never mind.’

‘No, really!’ Then she registers my expression, the conservative parts of me fanning out and constructing a boundary. ‘OK,’ she says, ‘not pole dancing. How about you come to my gym as a visitor?’

A tiny thrill rushes through my body. Exercise sweeps away my anxiety better than intimacy, or even the stirrings of love.

I smile and Lara looks satisfied. ‘Good,’ she says with a decisive nod. ‘Now, the day isn’t over yet. Follow me.’

We navigate our way through the congregation of tables and emerge into the bright sunlight. I’m grateful for Lara’s patience, but eventually, my history will surface. I cannot avoid it forever, and I don’t want to. I want to share what happened, despite the fear that my friends will judge me for it. Sooner or later, I will have to explain how I fell in love in Jordan, but not with my husband.



Lara leads me to the chocolate shop next door. We enter, an old-school bell ringing out as we step inside. Several customers crowd the space that’s deceptively larger than it appears from the outside. I head to a small counter where a variety of handmade chocolates are on display. Many of them are in bold colours – lapis blue, gold, silver, lemon yellow. Others are marbled, dusted, topped with an almond. There are pralines and shards in white, milk and dark chocolate. I crane my neck

for a better look and see more elaborate offerings, as well as chocolates packaged in colourful boxes on a shelf, ready to go.

‘Aren’t they beautiful?’ says Lara, coming to a stop beside me. ‘And they taste amazing.’

‘Stunning.’ The craft involved, the care and delicacy.

‘Sometimes I look through the window and imagine the flavours,’ she says. Then her phone rings and she raises a finger in apology before escaping out the front door.

I direct my attention to the back of the store, where through a doorway, I can see the studio. A man in chef’s whites is tempering chocolate on a metre-long marble counter, thick, wavy hair peeking out from under his chef’s cap. His concentration is steady, his movements concise and clipped. He is not expressive, but what some might assess as boredom I recognise as ease; he is practised at what he does. Doesn’t have to think too hard. He’s in a creative zone, oblivious to the bustle of the shop.

Occasionally, he is eclipsed by browsing customers, but I stay in place, losing what must be minutes watching him work. He’s good, and my body is responsive to the image. Very quickly, my hands itch to be doing the same. I catch myself almost imitating the dance of his limbs – one arm extending swiftly to scoop up the melted chocolate with a tempering spatula, his other hand swiftly removing it with a bench scraper. The sounds and scents flood my senses as if I’m the one standing behind the counter.

Muscle memory. I used to temper chocolate for cake decoration, but in much smaller amounts. I feel cheered by the feelings it has reawakened within me, my creative brain wearily emerging from its years-long slumber.