

*Over truth, there is light.*

—Moroccan proverb

I know nothing of the truth. Yet it lives in me; in the length of my bones, the sway of my back, in the questions I cannot answer. It lives in my dark and bloody womb, full of fluid and child and hope.

There is a Rumi story: the truth was a mirror in the hand of God. One day it fell and shattered, pieces scattering across the Earth. Each person who found one believed they alone possessed the truth. What follows here is my glittering shard, and with it, the dark matter of its reverse. The truth and the lie. More similar than you may think – after all, even now, I often can't tell the difference. If there is indeed a difference.

In Marrakech, storytellers begin not with 'Once upon a time . . .' but rather with the open, more tentative 'Once there was and maybe there wasn't . . .' And so, certain in my uncertainty, I begin.

**PART ONE**  
**THE MIRROR**

# ONE

*Hobart*  
*7 April 1999*

My grave is open. For forty days it sits, ready, waiting. I might avoid the fall. I might not. Will someone close my bones when this is over? Feed me soup? Steam my skin, anoint me with herbs and oil?

I breathe deep as I crest a wave of pain, fists clenched.

Focus. I'm serious, Zahra. Keep. Your. Shit. Together.

And it's over.

I collapse, arms falling against the plastic lining of the make-shift pool in our living room. Monks drone Gregorian chants from the CD player on the shelf, and the acrid scent of clary sage hangs heavy in the air. My naked belly emerges from the water, mountainous, volcanic. Outside, afternoon light filters through the leaves of the walnut tree, just now beginning to turn autumnal reds and yellows. As stillness descends, a ringing phone ricochets through my momentary zen.

'Hi. You've called Zahra and Jacob. We can't get to the phone right now. Leave a message and we'll call you back.' My voice sounds weirdly perky.

‘Zahra, it’s me.’ My mother’s words are thick with fear. ‘Just seeing how you’re going. Umm, anyway, thinking of you. Call us when you have any news.’

And it’s back. I set my jaw, steel myself. I’m surfing a monstrous ocean, black whirlpools swirling beneath me. All I can do is not fall in, fight the urge to let it consume me.

Stay up, Zahra. Stay up.

Jacob touches my arm, whispers, ‘Good work.’ My senses are electric, his touch excruciating, breath rank. What the fuck has he been eating? It comes to me. Pickles. But I can’t talk. Not now, because I can’t lose my balance. Stay up, Zahra. Stay up, stay up, stay up . . .

It’s over.

I let out a mangled sob, feel my heartbeat slow.

Hiss the words, ‘No. More. Fucking. Pickles.’

It’s back again, and off again, and back again and off again until the waves crash, relentless against my body, and I can no longer come up for air. I remember that when there are no more breaks, it’s almost over, and sure enough, in ten minutes time, I’m on my hands and knees beside the pool, bearing down.

‘Can you see? It’s your baby’s head!’ The midwife holds a mirror between my legs, and Jacob makes a strange sucking noise. Horror or wonder, I can’t tell.

‘Stop. I can’t. I just want this to be over. Ugh.’ My words finish in a stream of vomit. With each retch, fluid gushes from my vagina, breasts dripping, snot streaming from my nose; liquid from every orifice. ‘I’m leaking!’ I am hysterical, out of control. Ridiculous.

And then, I am pushing, my body expanding beyond itself, beyond the edges of the world. I open my mouth, and as if called forth by my screams, my son’s head is born. And then, once more,

## HALF TRUTH

the earth of my body ruptures and I am a mother. Sobbing, broken, euphoric.

Dark curls are plastered against his wet, pink head.

A wrinkled, old-man, alien version of my face stares up at me.

I begin to cry.

He looks like me.

I've never met anyone who looks like me before.