

FARIDA

By Amal Ibrahim

## Prologue

I still remember the day I died.

I remember the Godawful stench; something akin to rotting flesh, vomit, and faeces. There was a smell and a taste to that day. A texture that could be felt without the sense of touch. I remember the smell of the air and the dark, brooding sky as it loomed large, the salt that hit my tongue as I sank to the bottom of the ocean and drowned.

I struggled.

I pushed my feet against the water as I tried to surge upward but found myself instead sinking further down.

I fought and struggled against the tidal wave that smacked against my head, lurching me forward through the air.

I drowned in fear more than any body of water.

Anyone that tells you a child doesn't know fear is lying.

That was the day I died.

It was also the day I was born.

## CHAPTER 1: AAIDA 2016

I sit to my mother's right. That's where I've always been. To her right. During conversations. During dinner. Always at her side; on the right side. It's an unspoken rule in our home, amongst our family. Still now, as I fumble through my forties, I had never noticed this until my 18 year old daughter verbalised this fact by saying "mum, do you realise you've always sat at tayta's right side?" My mind scrambles through its lens to find a time when I was not at my mother's right side. I can't find it. Can't seem to find a single event where I was not right there by my mother's right hand.

I squeeze her hand in mine, a soft squeeze across her broad, now wrinkled fingers, urging her on as she purges her secrets to me. All the things I didn't know. All the things left unsaid. All the secrets she tried so hard to keep while at the same time trying to protect me by moulding and shaping me into the kind of person that would inevitably rise above the constraints of culture and society and not allow history to repeat itself.

"When would you like to go?" I ask my mother, squeezing her hand gently. She sits quietly with a far away look in her eyes. She is with me, I know she is, barely holding on because she has something to say. No, not something. Some things.

"The spring would be lovely," mother tells me. "Remember the years we visited there, and how you would love the springtime? The sun would caress your face as you sat on your balcony and read endlessly. We all loved spring there."

“Then spring it is,” I tell her, pulling out my phone and messaging Nada to book the flights.

I’m already packed. I’ve been packed for almost 40 years. I’m only 42 years old. But my first memory is of me at 3, throwing a tantrum because I didn’t want to leave my beloved Lebanon. I didn’t want to go away from “teta” and “jeddo” and the cornfields we roamed during the day. I didn’t want to leave them. So, subconsciously, I never really unpacked when I got to Australia. Mentally, I was always back there in Lebanon, amongst my brethren, mixing with the townfolk and living a simple life off the land.

“Pack light,” my mother says. “No heels. Make sure no heels. You know they still have not fixed the roads to a standard worthy of heels.”

I laughed and looked down at my feet encased in a pair of beautiful Jimmy Choos. Mother was always complaining about my heels. “You’ll fall over and break your neck.....how do you walk in those skyscrapers?.....You’ll end up with scoliosis...” And my personal favourite-“Backs simply weren’t meant to carry heels, they were meant to carry children.” On and on she went, and all us girls sitting around would crack up laughing, rolling over each other at her wit, her tongue sharpening with something so unbelievably random every time.

“I’ll leave the heels behind, mum. What about books, can I take some books?”

“No. You’ll be too busy.”

I squinted and looked at her carefully.

“Busy doing what?”

“Writing your own story. You’ve read every damn story you could possibly get your hands on. Twice over. Isn’t it time you wrote *your* story?”

## CHAPTER 2: FARIDA 1970

The day I left...the day I was taken...four men with *khafiyehs* wrapped around their lower faces to hide their identities drove up close to me and Aujene as we were about to exit the mouth of the olive grove and commence our journey home on foot. I walked ahead, Aujene always lagging behind as she stopped to inspect the stumps of the trees and other vegetation to make sure no illness had befallen them. It would take us some fifteen minutes to get over the hill and walk down the winding road into the village, another seven minutes to reach our house, but with Aujene dragging her feet, we could so easily add another five minutes to our trip.

Two men jumped out of the back of the pickup truck, startling us both, grabbing me by the arms and dragging me to the car. I understood immediately what was happening, and started to struggle, kicking and screaming as one of the men clamped his hand down on my mouth. I bit him, and he yelped in pain as he jumped back, never letting go of my hand. I could feel the sting of his slap as his hand crashed down on my cheek, forcing my head back in shock. I gasped and looked to Aujene, who stood frozen in her place, staring at a man who was now approaching her.

“Aujene! Run!” I screamed, my fearful face giving her all the incentive she needed to spring into action. If anything, Aujene was nimble on her feet and could outrun the best of men. “Run fast!” I screamed again, as I watched her disappear into the grove with the man hot on her heels.

“Grab her!” one of the men screamed after Aujene’s assailants, as they both faded from our line of sight.

I continued to struggle against the two men who held me, one now putting a hood over my face as the other held my hands behind my back trying to tie them with something my struggling hands were rejecting.

“Let go of me!” I hissed. “What do you want?”

“Shhhh...” one of the men said, pulling at my arms to be quiet.

“Let me go,” I repeated, stomping my feet until I connected with someone’s foot. I stomped harder, then heard a deep grunt, and was lifted and thrown into the back of the pickup truck. They tried to tie my feet together as I floundered like a fish out of water. I knew I was not going home today-that was one thing that was for sure-and I determined that I would not be taken without a fight. I would make as much noise and wreak as much havoc as possible. That would be my only salvation and my only chance of escape.

Shortly, as I continued to struggle on the flatbed, I heard the men as they were having a discussion amongst themselves. It looked like the man who had run after Aujene had returned, and I stopped my movements so I could hear the conversation.

“Where’s the girl?” one asked.

“I lost her,” was the reply.

“What do you mean, you lost her?”

I recognised a third voice speaking up. “It doesn’t matter. She can’t identify us and she only would have been a hindrance.”

“You don’t know that she can’t identify us,” the second man countered.

“I know that we have our faces covered and we’re not from these areas. How could she ever identify us?”

“The only thing that’s going to identify us,” began a fourth voice “is if we continue to stand here and waste time and the girl comes back with help. Get in the truck and lets move. Now!” he bellowed.

I heard the slamming of the truck doors and we began to move. I could tell they drove through the grove, instead of driving back the way they had come. The grove was littered with rocks and debris. We drove for well over an hour, or maybe, in my desperation, a few minutes seemed like an hour.

Two of the men sat in the flatbed with me, their idle chatter a sprinkle of words in an otherwise uneventful drive.

“I can’t believe you couldn’t catch up with her,” one man spoke.

I recognised the voice of the man who had been following Aujene after she ran. “I think she fell into a ravine,” he whispered. “I lost her at a drop on the side of the grove. I couldn’t get close enough because it was too steep, but it’s a sheer drop.



No way she'd survive that." I could hear him exhaling. "But I don't want to believe that's what happened – I'm not in the business of murdering little girls."

"Look around you," the other man hissed. "You do whatever needs to be done to preserve yourself. You'll soon realize you've entered a world where it's either kill or be killed. And don't make a mistake like that again."

There was silence as the men went quiet and I breathed steadily. I knew the ravine the man was talking about, but there was no way Aujene went into that ravine. She knew the land better than she knew the back of her hand and would know exactly which trees to weave through in order to lose her assailant. She knew where every ravine and valley and nook was and would know exactly what to do to avoid capture. She was also smart, my little sister, smart enough to avoid detection, yet maintain the illusion that she had gone into the ravine and met her untimely demise. A soft smile played at my lips as I thought of Aujene. My wayward sister was fine. She had to be. Even now, I knew without doubt that she would already be at home, spurring out the story rapidly, driving my parents crazy with the actions she'd be making with her hands as she spoke.

I wondered if I would ever see her again. Wondered if there'd ever be occasion for our paths to cross again and I would sit and twirl my fingers in her curls, watching as they bounced back up after I pulled them. The chances of my parents catching up to this convoy before it left the village were zero. There was no way they'd find me before we left. And with a shaky breath I didn't know I'd been holding, I exhaled in resignation and sent a silent prayer that I was strong enough to deal with whatever lay ahead for me.

## CHAPTER 3: AUJENE 1970

I ran and ran and ran.

As fast as my legs would carry me.

I didn't want to.

I didn't want to leave Farida, but I would never disobey her instructions.

Never.

Farida was the smartest person I knew.

And Farida knew best.

So when she told me to run, I collected every ounce of my strength and sprinted into the grove, the sound of gravel digging up behind me along with the dust that rose like a bad omen then settled back down as though it was exhaling in relief.

I weaved through the olive trees, twisting and twining in an effort to lose my pursuer. I knew this land well, and it had never let me down. I ran past bracken and a low rising fence covered in the vines of hanging berries, heading for the caves that littered the side of the mountain. Known as the fastest runner in the village, I could even outrun grown men who boasted long legs and heights of six feet, but I met my match in this race as my assailant gained ground on me. I could hear his boots as they shuddered on the ground, louder and more violent than any hoofbeats

as he closed in on me, my heart thumping unbearably as the fear enveloped my heart.

Just as I rounded the corner to avoid the slippery slope of the slide into the deepest pits of the land, he reached out and grabbed me by the back collar of my dress, pulling me back so aggressively that my whole body lurched and I was wrestled to the ground. He placed one knee on my back and pressed me into the ground until my mouth was spitting out dust and leaves.

“Not a word,” he whispered, close to my ear.

There was a pregnant pause and I listened, waiting for what would come next. But all I heard was his deep breathing and I could swear, the heavy thumping gallop of a heartbeat as he rose and turned me over so that I looked up at him. I could see only his eyes and the soft blush of dirty blond hair emerging from beneath his khafiyeh.

I could feel the overwhelming hopelessness of fear as it encompassed me, and he aimed his rifle at my stomach, his chest rising rapidly in heavy breaths. He watched me, his brows folding in consternation as he stood looking over me, saying nothing. I willed him to speak, to say anything, give me any clue as to his intentions, but there was only a swirl of intense confusion in his dark blue eyes as his brows continued to knit together and he said nothing.

I shifted slightly, making a move to remove myself from under the butt of his rifle, but he just dug it deeper until I winced, then yielded a little when he saw me retreat from my ill thought out plan to escape.

“Listen carefully,” he rasped.

I continued to look at his eyes, for fear that I would blink and miss the second that decisiveness hit him and he proceeded to pull the trigger.

“I’m going to remove my gun. When I do, you get up, and you run. Run as fast as you can. You don’t have much time.”

I opened my mouth to say something, stunned, but no words emerged. I felt the butt of his gun move away and he stepped backward, waiting for me to stand. When I made no move to get up, he nodded his head once, an approval that I should do as I was told. Slowly, I stood up and stood before him, lifting my eyes to meet his. I could hear hoofbeats again, thumping away like a human heartbeat.

“Do a turn and go back the way you came. Don’t travel any path that a truck can pass through,” he continued to advise.

“My sister,” I breathed.

“Your sister is lost to you. Go! You don’t have much time.”

I looked at him, my eyes and unspoken words asking him why he was helping me. But I dared not stay any longer, for fear there would be more men coming. I also had a paranoid fear that he would shoot me in the back as I ran away, but for some reason, that didn’t seem likely. I turned away from him, then looked back once,

before I took flight and headed for the caves, but not before I heard him whisper  
“run, little one, run.”

## CHAPTER 4: TALA 1970

There came to pass many days and many months. It could even have been years. I lost all track of time, all semblance of normalcy. Day became night and night became my prison. I came to be known in the village as ‘the lost one’.

That’s when the hand wringing began. I would walk through the village streets, wringing my hands and muttering. Muttering what, I do not know. I only know that I mumbled and cursed and sighed as I wandered listlessly through the streets in search of my beautiful Farida.

My lost daughter. No one knew anything. She was just gone. Lost to everyone. Farouk, her fiancé, would come by every few days, looking devastated and feeling sorry for himself. He was beside himself with grief, but he was useless. While we scoured the earth, from village to village in search of our beautiful Lost Farida, he went about his life as he had when living it previously. Working. Sleeping. Eating. Crying over things he didn’t deserve in the first place. I realised that, no matter what had befallen Farida, it could not have been a fate worse than marrying Farouk. Farida embodied everything beautiful and pure and light in the world-she deserved, at the very least, a man who would make her the centre of his universe. A man who would love her to such an extent that he would search high and low to find his missing love. But Farouk, if anything, proved to be a spineless wretch, not worthy of a token lock of Farida’s hair.

So I continued to search, as the days spilled into weeks and the weeks rolled into months...walking barefoot from village to village, asking if anyone had seen my beautiful Farida with the long black hair and equally mesmerising black eyes.

I remember at times I would be so exhausted, I would lay by the side of the road to rest my weary eyes, and wake many hours later to the dark of night, with no way to know what time it was, except that I was the only person out in the dead of night.

It was the same questions, over and over, on auto repeat:

“Have you see my girl?”

“Do you know where she is?”

“Do you have any information; do you know where I can look?”

Until I finally came across a street vendor named Emad. A shepherd from a nearby village pointed me in his direction and said “if anyone can find your daughter, it will be Emad, the street vendor on First Street-go and see him. But it will come at a price.”

The shepherd had turned away from me and started on his way even before I could ask him what the price would be. We weren't a family of considerable means. With a family comprising 8 mouths to feed, we lived within, if not just below, the poverty line. We both worked the land, Amjad and me, to put food on the table. Each time I was with child, we went through even tighter times because I wasn't able to contribute to our livelihood. Amjad would constantly harangue me about this fact-like the fact that I was with child was my fault and mine alone. Even after giving birth, there would be no rest. I would swaddle the newborn

within a week of giving birth and attach her to my chest in a makeshift pouch as I joined Amjad on the land and recommenced work.

I carried on toward the street vendor and finally came to be standing in front of him. He was an imposing man, with a cigar dangling from his mouth, slouched in a chair by the side of the road like he was anticipating his next article of prey. He had small beady black eyes that shifted left right left any time there was movement on the road. When he opened his mouth in greeting, his lips curled to the side in a leering manner derelict of any consciousness of soul. A burst of heavy cigar fumes rushed forward from his mouth as he let out a breath and waited for me to instigate a conversation. When I did not, he steered the conversation in his own way.

“I know who you are,” he said, pointing toward my chest matter-of-factly. “Why you’re here. What took you so long?”

I remained silent. Of course he knew who I was . The man made a living out of other peoples’ misfortune - it was his job to know what was happening to whom at all times and to anticipate a visit from a needy stranger.

His manner gave me pause to consider my decision to seek him out. I was not an educated woman. I did not mingle and mix with many people...in our village, and even though it was small and everyone knew their neighbours, we all kept to ourselves. I had not travelled and could not claim to be worldly or well versed in the art of human behaviour, but I did possess that one human trait inherent in all women-instinct. The man instilled in me an odd feeling I had never encountered before. I felt as though something was crawling under my skin, dying to burst forward.



“Can you help me?” I asked.

The street vendor looked me up and down, his mouth permanently set in a leering smirk. I could almost see the wheels turning in his brain as he considered his next words.

“What can you offer me?” he asked.

“I don’t have much. For the sake of God, can you help me find my daughter?”

I stood watching him uncomfortably as he continued to leer, his eyes stripping me naked as he peeled back layer upon layer of my clothing. I needed the help, was desperate for some guidance to find my daughter, but the longer I stood there, the more I felt like I was selling my soul to the devil. I realized what he was proposing when his hand slid down his front to his throbbing member and he turned to indicate a dark alcove behind his cart. At that, my deepest instincts took root and I took flight without a second thought as he continued to cackle and indicate his desire to have his way with me. I removed myself from that situation and continued on my way in my tireless search for my missing daughter.

## CHAPTER 5: AUJENE 1970

Our father gave up on us. That's all I know. He blamed our mother for Farida's disappearance. He blamed our mother for everything, and nothing was ever the same between my parents after Farida was gone. At night I heard my mother whimpering, followed shortly after by two sharp slaps, whereby she would emit a sharp gasp, her voice trembling as she continued to cry and my father slammed the door on his way out of the house. She wore the soles of her shoes thin walking from village to village asking about Farida's whereabouts. She shut the whole world out, overlooked her other children, neglected her home, and drove herself slowly insane with grief.

## CHAPTER 6: FARIDA 1970

An underground bunker was my home for the next 42 days. I know it was 42 days because I used the stick tally method of counting that my illiterate mother had taught me. I took a stick I found lying in the cell and scraped a faint line into the wall after every breakfast was served. A stick for every 4 days, then on the fifth day, a line running through the sticks from top right to bottom left to signal a unit of 5. I counted 42. 42 days away from my home. Living underground. No sun, no sky, no sea...just the arid, musty air that breezed through the cell and made the days and nights interminable.

The floor of the cell was one of dirt, and in the corner lay a mattress stripped of sheets, on which I lay my head most hours of the day.

I thought of my family, and wondered why they hadn't come for me. Farouk crossed my mind, but in the way that you would feel as though that person was one you knew from a long time ago. To be honest, I didn't know what I felt for Farouk. Obviously I didn't love him with a jaw clenching urgency or bone weary thirst that clutched at me and threatened to strangle me. No. Indifference. I was indifferent toward him. Really, I couldn't care less.

I ran my fingers gingerly over the tally etchings and wondered who had been here before me, if anyone had. Had they sat in this very spot and wondered the same thing about who came before them, who came after? I scoffed to myself; mother always said I was a day dreamer.

There was the sound of boots thudding down the stairs as someone entered the huge cavern and came to stand before me. I held my breath everytime someone came in, never knowing what to expect. I exhaled in relief when I realized it was only Jihad.

“Any news?” I asked him, my fingers curling around the bars of the cell.

“The Shaikh will come to see you soon,” he whispered, looking over his shoulder. “Farida, do you need anything? Have you eaten?” he asked eagerly. “I can’t stay long.”

“I just want to go home, Jihad. Why won’t they let me go?”

He bit his lip and looked down at his boots, caked with mud. I surmised we must have had a particularly bad rainfall.

“Things will appear clearer once the Shaikh comes to see you. Then we will know what will happen.”

“I have a bad feeling, Jihad,” I said worriedly. “Girls aren’t usually stolen just to be held in underground bunkers.”

He looked over his shoulder again, agitated and concerned, before turning back to me.

“Whatever happens, know that I have your best interests at heart,” he informed me.

“But can’t you send word to my family?”

“Farida, this is not the sort of clan you want your family to go up against. They are the most ruthless in the region. Only another equally powerful tribe can go up against them. I have to go now. I will come and check up on you again soon.”

## CHAPTER 7: FARIDA 1970 - THE FIRST FARIDA

***Farida: Arabic name assigned to a female, meaning “unique”.***

*My parents named me Farida.*

*Not for any uniqueness I held even before I was born.*

*They named me Farida for the Legend of Farida.*

*It was said, in our village, Tul Ghosn, about a hundred years ago, there lived a woman with mesmerizing dark eyes and black hair like the blackest night. She went by the name of Farida. She was a beautiful, stalwart girl whom men lusted after and women envied. The young girls of the village all idolised her, accepting the wayfarer into their village after she broke from a Syrian Bedouin tribe and exiled herself in Lebanon.*

*Not much was known about the beautiful stranger, except that she lived in a tent on land owned by a farmer who had sought a better life for his family in Sweden, thus leaving the land vacant and unoccupied. She must have been in her late 20's when she came into the town and set up her tent, and when asked, had exclaimed that she was merely passing by on her way to see her grandmother in Beirut.*

*Although many of the town folk thought it strange that a female would be travelling on her own through the countryside of North Lebanon, most realized, and indeed, exhaled a sigh of relief that she was not their problem to deal with.*

*However, it was soon apparent that the village children, and majority of the women took to Farida and welcomed her into their midst.*

*It was said that Farida was able to predict the future and forewarn of calamitous events, preventing massive disasters. She was also able to predict the weather and successful crops, as well as who would marry whom.*

*To many, Farida's visions and predictions were a Godsend and helped the townspeople avoid certain disaster. But of course, there were those, struck by one chaotic event after another, who accused her of using magic and sorcery to create mischief on the land, and called for her to be hung by the neck until she died and the evil spirits were expelled from her body.*

*On one such night, all those many years ago, as the women of the village gathered for the send off celebration of a local bride, a handful of men banded together and conspired to do a dastardly deed. They kidnapped Farida, placing a hood over her face, but not before she could see who they were, and took her to a deserted plot in a neighbouring grove where they set up a makeshift gallow and proceeded to string her up. Her voice rose in protestations as she fought and clawed at the noose at her neck, to no avail.*

*"I bet you didn't see this one coming, did you witch!" one of the men cried.*

*Another screamed at her (perhaps in a momentary lapse of guilt) that he was trying to protect his wife and daughters and all the womenfolk of the village from her vile magic which was threatening to infect all their homes. Perhaps this had been him justifying his actions to himself and to his Lord.*

*“Any last words?” one screamed at her, his hand steadying the chair on which Farida’s legs were standing.*

*“You don’t know what you’re doing! Let me down,” she pleaded.*

*“Tonight you die here, witch!” another screamed. “Tomorrow, you will be gone and the women will be none the wiser. Our village will be safe. Our women and daughters and sisters will be safe from your corrupt magic.”*

*“Last words, witch. Do you have any last words?” The man holding the chair asked again, his hand shaking as it hovered near Farida’s feet. Another man looked at him and could see the fear and remorse in the man’s eyes as he started to have regrets about what he was doing.*

*And just as Farida cried out “I curse all your houses for generations to come,” the second man kicked the chair from under Farida and Farida shot upwards into the dark. Her body spasmed and her feet twitched for several minutes as the life seeped out of her and Farida met her end. The man who’d been holding the chair looked away in despair, conflicted about whether or not they had done the right thing. The man who kicked the chair looked at him in disgust then turned away and spat on the grass nearby. Several more minutes passed before Farida was lowered to the ground and loaded onto the back of a pickup truck and the men started on part two of their journey towards a life without Farida.*

*To further compound the crime, they denied her a proper burial in the town, and her body was thrown into the sea, where some say, her spirit still lingers exacting*



*all manner of revenge on the descendants of those who murdered her. Her things were bundled in an old cloth bag and also found their resting place at the bottom of the ocean.*

*The men believed that the women would be none the wiser; Farida had merely packed her things and left the village, they would explain; a true Bedouin at heart who sought to travel from village to village, wreaking havoc on the common people with her mischievous ways.*

*The day after Farida was martyred, a heavy storm blew into the village. The winds sounded almost as though they were howling in mourning as they travelled at extremely high speeds and reaped destruction throughout the land. The village lost every crop for the season as winds and floods worked in tandem to leave as much damage as possible. Some of the livestock succumbed to drowning, and even a young child was pulled into the deluge and swept away to his death.*

*The irony was that Farida had already forewarned them of the storm days before her death and advised them to herd their livestock to safety and pick as much of the crop as they possibly could prior to the storm hitting. She had given them explicit instructions, right down to almost the hour on what should be done to minimise the damage to the land and had even warned that every village person, young or old, be safely ensconced in their home by Maghreb prayer time to ensure their safety.*

*For the women, the fact that Farida had left had somehow rendered her future premonitions obsolete and they ignored her warning. While the men, glad to be rid of the mischievous dark eyed girl with the raven hair had totally overlooked this prediction and thus lost everything.*

*The child who was sadly and innocently dragged through the deluge was the grandson of one of the men who had conspired the extermination of Farida from the earth.*

*It was Abu Nader, the man who held the chair at Farida's hanging, that finally broke. The weight of what they had done and the burden of guilt that weighed on his shoulders ensured he was never the same again. The storm that swept in and ravaged the town, ensuring he lost a whole season's crop, agitated him even more and promoted in him a fear to even step outside his own home. His wife, already suspicious about the changes in him since the disappearance of Farida, urged him to cleanse his soul and unburden himself to her by telling her what it was that caused him such restless nights.*

*Finally, he broke down and told her the whole story, his version coming out in sobs and hiccups as he recalled bits and pieces of the event he had tried so hard to shove into the deepest recesses of his brain.*

*"And she cursed us all as she took her last breath?" Em Nader asked for the fourth time, wide eyed.*

*"She cursed every last one of us and our descendants. And now Moin has lost his grandson. We have all lost our livelihood. We don't know what is yet to come."*

*"Well, there is nothing much that can be done now, Abu Nader. The girl is gone. She's dead. At the bottom of the sea."*

*Abu Nader winced as each one of his wife's descriptions of Farida's final resting place burst forth from her mouth. She spoke with clenched teeth, her anger surging through her and blotching her skin as she loomed over him in disgust.*

*"You tossed that poor girl into the sea and made shark meat out of her. For the first time in our married life, I am ashamed to call you my husband, Abu Nader! That girl did no harm. She looked after our children and gave the village guidance on what was to come and how to deal with calamity!"*

*"She was a sorcerer!" Abu Nader defended.*

*"Are you so blind that you can't see the way of the world? The girl spent her life wandering the land and sleeping in a tent-of course she would have learnt to read weather patterns and best conditions for crop!" Em Nader threw up an exasperated hand and looked to the sky for salvation. "I tried to tell you over and over again-she was not a soothsayer. She learnt to predict the weather. She was a keen observer and could tell who would marry who by the furtive glances the children would throw one another. She estimated when a woman would give birth depending on how low a woman's pregnant belly fell. I told you all this!" she hissed. "And yet, you still managed to ignore what I said, shutting me up every time I opened my mouth to speak, and followed a bunch of stupid uneducated spineless and cowardly men to commit MURDER! You stupid, foolish man!"*

*Abu Nader sat dumbfounded, looking at his wife as she continued to rant and berate him. She had never spoken to him this way. He never would have allowed it. He was the man of the house. But now, sitting and listening to everything she had to say, he knew she was absolutely and undoubtedly right. If he had just listened to*

*her and ignored the vicious whispers of the other men, he would not have become involved in this drama and would not now be living in a constant state of crippling fear or carrying the guilt of a hundred men.*

*“Tell me what I can do,” he begged, his voice a raspy whisper.*

*“There’s nothing you can do, Abu Nader” the woman hissed. “The girl is gone and I hope this teaches you a valuable lesson. My advice to you, make sincere istighfar and pray as much as you can that Allah forgives you. Pray for that poor girl’s soul and make penance...give charity in her name and give plenty, because if I were Farida, I sure as hell wouldn’t forgive you.”*

*Em Nader was adamant that the village elders, especially the women, knew what became of Farida. If only for the fact that she was afraid of Farida’s curse and wanted to warn everybody. It started with one whisper, from Em Nader to Bushra, whose husband also took part in the killing, until all the women whose husbands had had a hand in Farida’s demise came together to meet and discuss the repercussions of their husbands’ wayward behaviour.*

*“The rest of the village must know,” one stated.*

*“Why must they know?” enquired another. “This could become bigger than you or I and end up in the hands of the police. Then, where would we be?”*

*“You can’t carry a curse and not know who cursed you and why,” a third woman responded. “Everyone should know so that they can protect themselves.”*

*“It was an evil deed that these men perpetrated,” Em Nader reminded them. “We are all responsible, men and women alike, those who did participate and those that did not. We are all responsible to right this terrible wrong.”*

*They planted a tree in Farida’s honour. Right when she had piked her tent into the ground, on the abandoned land of the man who had left the village for greener pastures on the other side of the world.*

*They paid alms and built a second well for the sake of Farida’s memory.*

*They named their daughters Farida in the hope that this would quell the legend of the curse of Farida.*

*And the legend was passed on from generation to generation, as each in turn tried to do enough to reverse the curse of the tormented girl who had been thrown into the ocean.*

## CHAPTER 8: FARIDA 1970

No one really knew whether or not the story of the first Farida was myth or legend, or a mix of both. But then...didn't every story come from a grain of truth? Someone could be listening to a rerun of my history one day and wonder if it were a true story or merely something concocted by someone's vivid imagination.

But I guessed the first Farida's story had to have come from somewhere. And there had to be some truth to her story, otherwise why would the town folk, year after year, and birth after birth, insist on naming their daughters Farida, if not out of superstition that if they did not do so, then the ghost of Farida would haunt and curse them til the end of time?

My mother had told me the story of the first Farida, and her mother, my grandmother, had told her the story before that. My father also spoke often of the first Farida, recounting bits and pieces as he'd heard from his parents and grandparents over the years. By the time I was 12, I had pieced together the first Farida's life simply by listening to stories from everyone around me, from the village elders to my own family and the various shopkeepers who had also been handed down their own stories. I didn't consider a story authentic unless it was reinforced by a second source, and sometimes a third similar yet independent account of events. Once all the stories were told and retold, a picture emerged of a sad and tragic life that had been cut too short by the evil hands of a few ignorant fools.

Farida had been a beautiful traveller. A wanderer who happened across our little village one day and set her tent upon unused land to rest her weary head. No one

knew exactly why she had broken from her clan, but a popular theory that kept emerging was that she had been heartbroken when her one true love had chosen to marry her sister instead of her. Farida, with her snow white skin, flaming black hair and dark brooding eyes, had been welcomed into the bosom of the village and taken under the wing of the women, who loved her carefree spirit and appreciated her interaction with their children. She played with them and told them stories, even held lessons for them, teaching them to read and write basic Arabic. No one knew how or why she was literate, especially as girls attending lessons was not commonplace in the day.

She was helpful and warm, concerned when any woman got sick and rushing to her aid to help cook and clean for the family to give the mother much needed rest. She was smart and funny and articulate, wise beyond her years, and possessed an intelligence not found even amongst most men. She refused the advances of many a man who tried to entice her, and gave selflessly of her time and patience to those in need.

All the stories I heard about Farida, which I had committed to memory, told the story of a young girl who had an uncanny intuition to deduce things before they happened. She was able to predict weather patterns and relay communication as to how these would affect various crops. She was able to determine if a woman would give birth to a boy or a girl. During her time in the village, she had made many judgements that had come to fruition.

Farida's predictions were what eventually got her killed, her body weighted down at the bottom of the ocean for the fish to feed on. Her murder, by all accounts, was at the hands of a group of councilmen who accused her of witchery. Over the years,

there had been many rumours as to which families had participated in the death sentence, but too many conflicting names had led me to believe no-one really knew who was responsible. The poor Farida was hung up by the neck until it snapped then thrown into the mercy of the sea, where she ceased to be.

The women of the village, when they finally found out what had happened to Farida, had been devastated. The children were inconsolable. The men believed they had rid the village of a sorceress, while the women screamed and raved that they had killed an innocent girl for doing what most educated people do – guess the gender of a child by the mother’s cravings and the way her stomach is formed, look to the stars and the moon and sky for confirmation of incoming weather conditions, foresee success of crops according to weather patterns. Each and every one of her “divinations” could have been explained by science, yet the men had gotten it into their heads that the village would be safer without the local magician and taken matters into their own hands. And there began the curse of Farida.

There were stories of children inexplicably dying without reason. Women miscarrying their unborn babies. Crops failing year after year. The temporary flourish of wealth that the village experienced suddenly ceased to be upon Farida’s demise. The women surmised that was due to a curse placed upon the village, for the great injustice that had befallen a guest, the senseless murder purging the village of any remaining good.

The women banded together and built a well in Farida’s memory...which quickly dried up. They started to name their daughters Farida, in tribute to the martyred girl. They made endless dua and supplications for forgiveness, willing the banishment of the torment they felt to vanish. They banished their husbands from



their beds, blaming them for the catastrophe that had befallen them, and the women rose as one voice, blaming all of the village's misgivings on male stupidity.

Now I wondered what people would think of my story. Of my imprisonment. Would they believe that a girl was stolen and held captive underground for a number of weeks, or months, possibly even years? Would they find my bones and bury them, lay a marker where the townspeople would visit and say a little prayer, and condemn the evil that had grabbed me from the safety of my family to see out my last days in a bunker no bigger than a closet?

I could see now the truth in the first Farida's story. Sometimes, no matter how hard you tried to deny the facts, even the most unbelievable stories held some truth. They held a morsel of a lesson for all to learn and live by. I wondered if I would meet the same fate as Farida. She had died for nothing. Simply for being Farida. Simply for being there. Simply for being an intelligent young girl who could lead a village to prosperity, something no man had been prepared to bear witness to.

I was merely a girl. Who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, doing the right thing. Yet here I was now, sitting on the dirt with my legs tucked under me, making dua and drawing on Farida's strength to guide me through my darkest hour.

What would become of me? Would I be immortalised? Written about in books? Etched on the rocky ledge of the caves that were scattered in our village the way the original Farida's name and face had been etched many many years ago? Would

I still be remembered in a hundred years? Would I be mourned by my family? Nieces and nephews I would never meet? How would my story be narrated?

I had all the time in the world and no where to go. My mind wandered, playing games with me, enticing stories out of the hidden recesses of my brain that I would turn over in my mind's eye, then play over and over again as the days swept by to pass the time.

I envisioned myself going home, engulfed in the arms of my mother. My father's face would be a well of sadness deep in the pits of grief. My younger siblings, all grown, would not remember me. Aujene would be married, and she'd have a girl named Farida and possibly a boy named Farid. I smiled at that. Aujene was known as the tomboy of the village – to imagine her married and shackled to a man who would control her every move was near hilarious. For although she resembled me a lot in her colouring and features, and she turned many a head as we walked through the village to tend to the olive grove, Aujene had never really reconciled with herself just how beautiful she was. She was stunning by all accounts, and this was evident in the way that people looked at her, but all she could think about was climbing trees and toiling in the land. The earth was her soul. The dirt was her salt. She lived and breathed the land the same way most people lived and breathed life. I missed her. I missed her with a zest reserved only for those closest to one's heart. I imagined conversations with her, and at times, Jihad would emerge from the darkness of the tunnel leading into the bunker frowning, asking me who I was talking to. I would simply smile and tell him "My sister Aujene -she keeps me company while I wait for the day to be free of this prison." Jihad's eyes would soften in sadness, and I would feel sad that I had made him join in my misery, but

at the end of the day, I was on the wrong side of the bars, so I was allowed that concession.

I no longer thought about Farouk. By now, he seemed like a distant memory, and if I focussed hard enough, I could even make the thought of him vanish just by clearing my mind of all the chaos and clutter that lurked there. Eventually, he would marry, I realized, thankful that one good thing had come of my imprisonment. I would not be forced to marry Farouk, who my father had pronounced was the family's saviour. A young man who had lived his life between the village and the city, commuting back and forth to further his education, and had eventually ensured his future by winning a government job, which promised a bright future and a secure lifetime pension after retirement. My father seemed to think Farouk's good fortune would rub off on our family, or that his wealth would somehow end up in his own pocket. A thought that didn't make sense in the least, especially as for the time we'd known Farouk, he had never once visited carrying so much as a loaf of bread, which was against the age old custom of a visitor bringing a gift when entering another's home. I recalled that when we'd visited with his family, my mother and father had argued over what sweets to take the family. Another time, it was a watermelon. A third time, a kilo of freshly ground coffee beans. And even though Farouk's empty hands had confounded my father, he never ever would have backed down from an agreement or brought up the fact that Farouk was not playing by the cultural norms everyone else around us adhered to religiously. I saw this trait in Farouk as one worthy of kicking him to the curb, and said as much to my mother, who looked to me with an exasperated sigh, agreeing silently but telling me with her silence that her hands were tied and my father would not recall his agreement to give my hand in marriage to Farouk, who pushed incessantly for a closer wedding date.

## CHAPTER 9: FARIDA 1970

On the 43rd day, I felt, before I saw, a shift in the air of the prison cell. Shortly thereafter, a scuffle of excited activity as a flurry of men entered the space beyond the cell and milled about a man I had not seen before. An imposing man in a heavy, embroidered robe, a smattering of delicate hair sprinkled across his chin, masquerading as a beard. I assumed this was the Shaikh of the tribesmen who had kidnapped me but said nothing as he approached my cell door.

The newcomer regarded me carefully, then furrowed his eyebrows and squinted, looking toward me for something I could not comprehend, but something that became apparent a mere few seconds later.

“You fools,” he muttered. “While I applaud you on capturing such a fine beauty, this is not the girl you were tasked with obtaining.”

He berated and belittled the men milling behind him, assuring them that they had “captured” the wrong girl.

“But shaikhna,” one of the guards started, lowering his gaze in respect as he spoke to the newcomer. “This girl is Farida, who you asked for, grabbed from the Boden olive grove, at the precise day and time that you indicated she would be there.”

The newcomer turned to the speaker and raised an eyebrow before speaking. It seemed like he was measuring his words carefully.

“You may have obtained her from the place I indicated, and her name may indeed be Farida, but she is not my Farida. Did you even stop to ask her and confirm her identity?”

“Why yes sire, several girls at the site indicated her name is Farida.”

“And did it not occur to you that there may be more than one girl working the olive grove who was named Farida? You seem to forget, the legend of that village’s history was named Farida and half of the girls in that village carry the name of Farida!”

The guard looked at me dumbfounded and shook his head in confusion, then turned back to his master, perhaps not fully comprehending the immense magnitude of his actions. And there, in that instance, holding my breath, I thought everything was right with the world and I would be sent back home.

A shuffling sound behind the newcomer diverted my eyes from one man to another, and I felt the moment that a shadow of fear crossed my mind. Jihad, standing behind the Shaikh, had moved slightly, and I could sense this was in agitation of the unfolding conversation. Something had him worried.

“Return her and bring me the real Farida!” demanded the Shaikh.

“But shaikhna, we cannot do that. The local cultural laws are designed to protect the honour of the clans and their families. If a girl is removed from her home then returned, she is tainted. She will be killed, along with each one of us, strung up by the neck in the town square if the local villagers get a hold of us.”

“Then you know what you must do,” the newcomer said, turning away with a flourish of his robe.

And in that instant, with the eyes of half a dozen men cemented on me, my fate was sealed as I realized there would be no going home.

## CHAPTER 10: FARIDA 1970

Jihad came to see me the next day while making his rounds. He looked at me as he approached, a look of consternation on his face. For as long as I had known him, from that first time he came into the bunker after I had been there for two days, I had known that if there was any hope for me at all, it lay with Jihad. I had recognised him as the guard who had followed Aujene into the grove on the day that I was taken and everything changed. He was the one that had gone running into the grove after my sister.

He had produced a chocolate bar and passed it through the bars, telling me it was all he had. He kept looking over his shoulders, maybe a little worried that he would be caught in the bunker when he wasn't supposed to be there.

"I'm not supposed to be here," Jihad said.

"What happened to my sister?" I asked, hurriedly. "Where is she?"

"She's safe. She got away."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this to me? When can I go home?"

"So many questions," he tsked.

"I just want to go home to my family."

“Well, that’s not up to me.”

Jihad went on to tell me his name, and I could see that he was only slightly older than me. He informed me that I’d been kidnapped at the behest of a very powerful local shaikh, and he didn’t know what would happen next, but advised me to keep my head down and not get feisty with the guards when they turned up.

“Have they been coming?” he asked.

“Someone brings breakfast in the morning. Sometimes a late dinner. They give me water. But I don’t see them much.”

“I’ll come to see you again when I can,” he murmured, before turning to leave.

“Wait!” I urged. “Why are you doing this?” and I held up the chocolate bar in silent thanks.

“I have a sister. I don’t know what I’d do if something like this happened to her. Maybe the good I put out there will be the karma I get back.”



## CHAPTER 11: FARIDA 1970

Every few days, Jihad would come to visit, usually in the afternoon. He would tell me stories about his life, and his family, with whom he had broken ties because of an incident that had happened in their village back in Syria. I would sit by the bars, listening intently, a lilt in his voice as he relayed to me stories of the outside world.

“So how did you end up here with this clan?” I asked him, taking a sip of water from the fresh bottle he had provided me.

“Self-imposed exile, I guess. After what happened in the village, I had to leave, so I travelled across the border and ended up on the side of a road. One of the guards picked me up and invited me to join the security board for the shaikh of a local clan. I had no idea who he was when I committed to the job, and eventually when I did find out, well...it’s not the sort of situation where you just get up and leave.”

“Why not?” I asked him.

“He’s a very powerful man, with long reaching arms. He can basically reach anyone anywhere, or so I’ve been told. Once I have enough resources to head off to another country, maybe I’ll take my chances, but not now.”

“That’s no way to live a life,” I whispered.

Jihad shrugged as if to say it is what it is and that was it.

“I wonder what life has in store for me,” I muttered softly.

“Just keep your head down like you’ve been doing, don’t say anything and don’t agitate them. These are very dangerous men playing a very dangerous game.”

“And you’re playing with them,” I reminded him.

“With any luck, this will all be over soon,” he whispered, getting up to leave.

“Promise me something,” I urged him, my fingers wrapping around the bars of my cell in desperation. Jihad looked at me sadly. I knew if there was a way, he would have broken me out of the cell and helped me escape. I knew that with everything in me, especially after he had told me the story of how he had let Aujene go that day in the grove. If not for Jihad, I feared the same fate-maybe worse-would have befallen my younger sister.

“Anything,” Jihad whispered, reinforcing my conviction that he was a good man.

“If they...” I paused and took a deep breath, not knowing how to go on with my request without breaking down. My eyes fluttered with moisture and I looked at the ceiling in an attempt to stop the flow of tears before it began. I knew all the tell-tale signs that told me I was on the brink of a break down. “If they do come for me...If I should end up dead...”

“Don’t say that,” he interrupted me.

“You said it yourself, these are dangerous men. And dangerous men will do anything to save themselves. There’s no way they’re taking me back to the village.”

“It’s not over yet,” Jihad reminded me.

“If I don’t make it,” I implored him “please let my family know. They will need some sort of closure.”

Jihad looked down at his feet sadly and said nothing. I could see the anguish on his face, his pain mirroring my own. Jihad cared for me, not in a romantic way, but in a brotherly, protective way. The same way he would care for his own sister. I realized that in here, in my prison, he was the closest thing I had to family. And I knew, should my worst fear become a reality and I should cease to exist, that Jihad would do the right thing and send word to my parents about my demise. No matter how long it took him, he would grant me my last dying wish.

## CHAPTER 12: HASSAN 1970

“Shu badhu?” I asked. *What does he want?*

“I’m not sure, shaikhna, all I know is he’s come from the Waqas tribe and asked to meet you personally.”

“He’s not on our radar?”

“No, but apparently he hasn’t been with them long.”

I stared out the window and watched the field workers as they tended to the crop and carried baskets on their shoulders, transporting produce back to the village. I marvelled at the simplicity of the act of waking up, going to the land, seeking refuge amongst the vegetables, and having that sole responsibility to deal with. How simple and easy that would be-laborious, maybe, but sometimes I envied the fellaheen their position of simply having to take simple orders, rather than having to make hard decisions and choices you questioned at every turn.

“Bring him in,” I told him.

“But shaikhna...” the guard started to protest. I turned and looked at him sharply, and he went quiet, looking down at his feet solemnly and knowing that in debating my decision to meet with the stranger, he had overstepped his authority.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I asked, walking slowly toward him. Letting him know that he had a voice and I would allow him to share it.

“What if he’s been sent here to spy? Or to hurt you?” the guard argued.

“Would you allow him to hurt me, Sajed?” I asked.

“Never, shaikhna,” he said, bowing his head in respect.

“Then you bring him in and you stay. Watch him carefully.”

Momentarily, the man was shown into my den, and we sat down on the pillows that created a semi-circle in the room, meant for the gathering of men during important meetings. If nothing else, we respected any and all who entered our homes and treated them with courtesy. Sajed stood by the window watching carefully as we sipped our tea, whilst another guard stood by the door, his rifle flung against his chest, daring anyone to get past him.

I looked at the man as he sipped his tea, his hand shaking as he raised the cup to his mouth. He winced when he realized it was too hot and set the cup down. He couldn’t have been more than a boy, maybe 20 years old, with fair hair and dark blue eyes, like the night sky at midnight. It was rare to find a Bedouin with eyes that were such a mesmerizing colour. I urged him to speak after several minutes had passed and he hadn’t said a word.

“I need to know that I’ll be protected from the Waqas tribe for being the traitor that brings you this news,” he said, seeking my protection.

“You are in my house, and you are protected.”

“What about when I leave?” he asked, his face earnest, yet a frown was crested in his brow.

“What sort of news could you give me that would warrant protection?” I asked. “I don’t know that I would want to be involved in what you have to give me.”

He looked down at the rug before him and seemed to watch the swirls of the ornate design before letting out a deep breath. He lifted the tea cup to his lips and took another sip, his hand still shaking. I waited patiently for him to deliver the news that he so obviously believed he had risked his life to bring me.

“I didn’t know what they were doing.” He shook his head and looked at me, his face a defeated mask of regret. “I had to flee Syria due to family circumstances and found myself entwined with the Waqas tribe. I didn’t know anything about them, and I had no-where to go. The day after I joined them, some of the men told me they were going on a trip to harvest some olives in Tul Ghosn and I was to go along.”

The man stopped talking long enough for me to ask him his name.

“Jihad,” he replied. “My name is Jihad.”

“Go on,” I urged.

“That day, they took a girl from the olive grove. They stole her,” he clarified. “I was helpless to stop it, but I ran after her sister and scared her off to safety without them knowing.”

“They took a girl? Why?”

Jihad shook his head helplessly and pursed his quivering lips, the regret eating at him from the inside out.

“I didn’t know why until yesterday. The Waqas shaikh went to see her and made his intentions clear. He had asked the men to extract a particular girl from the village, but it appeared they had taken the wrong girl.” There were a multitude of questions in my head, but I allowed him to continue on.

“The men realized they couldn’t return her to the village, or they’d be strung up alongside her. They decided the best thing to do would be to kill her and try again to extract the girl they were originally supposed to.”

I shook my head and put my cup down. “They’ve killed her?”

Jihad shook his head in response and went on. “They’re planning to do it, but they haven’t got the nerve yet to do it. The guards, they’re brutish and can be violent, but they don’t just kill innocents, and never unless specifically ordered by the shaikh.”

“Where is the girl now?”

“In an underground bunker on deserted land a fair drive from here.”

“And you know where this bunker is?”

“Na’am, shaikhna, I visit with her often when I know the guard is not there.”

“Aah...,” I mumbled, my face contorting in understanding like I had discovered a long hidden secret. “You have taken a liking to the girl,” I mused.

“Not in the way you may think, shaikhna. I felt sorry for her, an innocent plucked from her family’s arms and destined for slaughter for no reason but that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“So what would you have me do?” I asked him.

Jihad shook his head in confusion, telling me he wasn’t sure what I’d be able to do, but he remembered his father telling him, at a very young age, that the only way to defeat a powerful man was to form an allegiance with another more powerful man.

“I don’t know what I thought you could do, I am just trying to save the girl. The men have mentioned on many an occasion that you are the only shaikh more powerful than Shaikh Waqas. I just felt an urge to come and tell you what has happened.”

“And they plan to take another girl?”



“Yes, shaikhna. As soon as they have disposed of this girl and made room in the cell for another, they will bring the other girl.”

“Has anyone touched her?”

He shook his head adamantly.

“So what will you do, if I tell you I can be of no help to you. What will you do?”

“Go back and try to find a way to break her out of her dungeon.”

“And then?”

“Send her home.”

I asked him if he knew the customs of the local tribes and the etiquette on a girl returning home after an unaccompanied absence. He shook his head and listened as I told him. “She can’t go back home. If she does, she will be killed.”

Jihad gasped and looked up at me sharply, a strand of his hair falling over his right eye.

“Then I will send her away,” Jihad proclaimed, somewhat naively.

“Where would you send a young, broken girl without getting her into more trouble, Jihad? Life is not as abstract as you may think. The girl’s fate if she returns home, or gets set on the streets, will be exactly the same as if she were to meet her

death in the confines of her prison. And if they know you set her free, surely they will kill you too.”

“I’m not afraid to die for what I believe in,” Jihad proclaimed, his right hand beating against his chest. “What is wrong is wrong, and I will not stand by and let them kill an innocent girl.”

I felt myself smirk. No matter how hard I tried to stop it, my mouth, of its own volition, curled up at the corner into a lopsided grin as I studied the young boy.

“You’re fighting mightily hard for a girl you say you have no feelings for,” I pointed out.

“I’m just trying to do the right thing here.”

“And what’s that, Jihad?”

“Not bear witness to a senseless murder that will take an innocent girl’s life and make me lose my mind with guilt and regret.”

## CHAPTER 13: FARIDA 1970

On the 46th day of my capture, everything changed. Jihad approached my cell , looking over his shoulder quickly as he came to stand before me. I recognised the pained look on his face and silently, with my eyes, sadly let him know that he was not responsible for my fate. He had done all he could, short of letting me go. He lowered his head and looked at his feet before looking back up at me and sighing.

“I don’t know what to do, Farida. I came to this tribe for protection, but I find myself involved in something bigger than myself.”

“You’ve involved yourself in a very dirty game, Jihad,” I spoke softly. “This is no way to live.”

“I can’t protect you anymore.”

“Then just let me go,” I insisted.

“There is no way you can go back to your family without getting yourself killed and sparking a raging war between the clans. Your family will be wiped out, you know this Farida.”

I looked at him sadly and realized the truth of what he said. My family, even if they did accept me back into the fold, even if the village elders did grant me clemency, which was so unlikely I dared not even think it, did not have the resources or capability to go up against the clan that had kidnapped me. They would try. But they would fail. Of this, I was certain.

“There is another neighbouring clan,” he started to explain. “A local one. One that presides over the affairs of the clans in the region. I have been to see their Shaikh and bring with me one final salvation.”

I scoffed. “What salvation could there possibly be if my death is imminent?”

Jihad moved to answer, but didn't have a chance to do so, as he was cut off by the thud of heavy boots tramping through the bunker. A man I'd not seen before came to stand beside him. Jihad shook his head in disbelief as he looked at the man, then looked at me with a fearful look in his eyes.

“That is all, Jihad, I will take it from here,” the newcomer said. I jutted my chin and prepared to do battle again in defence of my life.

“I don't think you quite understand your predicament,” the man started.

“I understand that I'm here against my will and you have no right to hold me.”

He mulled my words. “This is true. And true again. But I am not the one holding you prisoner here.”

“So I can go?” I asked him, quite naively.

“Not quite.”

I watched him as he shuffled around the space in front of the cell, then moved to wipe his brow before speaking again, measuring his words delicately.

“The Shaikh of the Waqas tribe sought the extraction of a girl named Farida from your village,” he began, by way of explanation. “Obviously, not you. The fact that you were taken in error is a serious one. Local custom dictates that when a girl leaves her family home for an extended period of time, regardless of circumstances, she is to return to her home only in a coffin. You will be considered tainted and hung up by your neck until you meet your death. Regardless of whether or not you are guilty of anything. You know this.”

My face paled as I realized what he was saying and understood the magnitude of going home.

He was right, word for word; that was exactly what would happen. For no matter how hard I desired to go home, I knew, without a doubt, that my return would not be looked upon favourably. I’d have a lot to explain but even moreover, a lot of convincing to do to persuade the village elders that I was still intact. The elders still held on to outdated customs and traditions, along with even more invalid practises such as “kill now, ask later”.

“I know that you going back would result in your unjust death. There will be no one to protect you – the word of the tribe elders is law.”

“And yet, I should be given a death penalty?” I whispered in disbelief. “For someone else’s mistake? Is this what a girl’s life is worth?”

I tasted the salt as my tears rolled down my cheeks and blended with my words as I made my case.

“The general consensus amongst the men of the tribe is that you should be killed.”

I gasped.

“Here. Killed and disposed of and they can wash their hands of this fiasco and move on. They just need this problem to go away.”

“So I’m damned if I stay and damned if I’m returned. All this for having the same name as another girl?” I looked at the man incredulously and shook my head in disbelief. “What sort of a life is this when a girl is plucked from the bosom of her family, caged like a wild animal, then slaughtered because someone made a mistake.”

The man sighed heavily and let out a long breath.

“I have sisters. Believe me, I know.”

“Then just let me go,” I whimpered. “Please, I won’t tell a soul.”

“You’re not mine to let go. I don’t belong to this tribe, nor do I subscribe to their practises.”

“Then who are you? What are you doing here? If you don’t hold the same beliefs as they do, you could just open this door and let me go,” I argued, with a determined yet frustrated clenching of my teeth.

“And where would you go, hmm? Where would a young girl, on her own, with no money, go if she can’t go back home because she’ll be killed if she does? Give me a relevant answer.”

I had no answer. I looked at the stranger helplessly and knew, with everything in me, that the laws of the tribe would be upheld and I’d be sent to my death. Yet staying here, I was also guaranteed certain death. At least, going home, there may be a chance, no matter how slim, that I may be excused from a death penalty...

“They’re going to kill me anyway. You said so yourself. I may as well take my chances back home.”

“You’d only be delaying the inevitable. You can’t go back there.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, my voice a mere whisper.

“There is one other option, although you might not like it.”

“I’m facing a death penalty either way; what could be worse than that?”

Jihad returned to the bunker after the visit from the clan member and spoke to me at length about the options the visitor had given me.

“I can’t believe you would do that,” I whispered, as Jihad looked at me with anguished eyes.

“Believe me, Farida, it was the only option. You don’t know how these things work.”

“I know that I’ve been stolen from my family, deprived of a normal existence, and tossed back and forth between two tribes while they figure out what to do with me. This is what I know,” I hissed.

“Your best bet at survival is with the Damour clan. Hassan is a just and honest man. He is the only one that can protect you—from the clan that took you and from your village elders.”

“What will happen now?” I asked.

“Hassan will meet with the Waqas Shaikh and broker a deal with him. They will hopefully reach some sort of civil agreement where the Damours will take on responsibility for you.”

“You say ‘hopefully’. Does that mean there’s a chance I could still stay here and die?” I asked him, incredulous.



“Shaikh Waqas is not known to be a diplomatic man. If anything, he is a tyrant and a master manipulator. He will make this as hard as possible on the Damours, squeezing every last drop out of the arrangement to his advantage. I’m amazed you’re actually still in one piece. The man is known for the violence he likes to inflict on others, especially women I hear.”

“And the shaikh that came here today, is he any better? He’s practically buying me from this prison to send me to another.”

“Farida, make no mistake. Shaikh Hassan Damour didn’t have to come here. He didn’t have to offer you a reasonable way out of this situation. And he definitely didn’t have to sully his hands with this situation. The fact that he even came here is a big deal in itself. That he’s made you this offer is not one to be trifled with.”

“You’re asking me to be grateful that someone I’ve never met has offered to marry me.”

“To save your life,” Jihad clarified. “He can have his pick of wives, and yet he’s chosen to sacrifice his own desires to help you.”

## CHAPTER 14: HASSAN 1970

I heard the soft strains of a female voice answering as Jihad tried to talk sense into the girl. The mellow lilt of her tongue betrayed her anger as she became more determined in her conversation with the man as he tried to break down the situation for her.

I went down the stairs, deliberately thumping my feet heavily so they would know an intruder was in their midst.

If her voice was like a melody of delicate petals falling on sand, her face was something to behold.

I took a quick look and noticed her chin go up, her defence mechanisms in place. I hadn't expected such a beauty. But I could see why Jihad had been drawn to her... her presence was like a magnet, pulling me in to her orb.

I dismissed Jihad and told the young girl how much trouble she was in. She accused me of holding her prisoner and asked me to let her leave. Her naivety was doing things to my chest I couldn't explain, her beauty causing me to turn away and wipe at a bead of sweat that had gathered above my brow. I tried not to look at the raven hair peeking out from under the front of her scarf and falling in a sheet down her back. Her eyes, the blackest black of the night, were shining, and I couldn't tell if that was their natural state or the blemish of tears as they formed under her long lashes.

I explained to her the implications of going home a “returned but tainted girl”, which was what she would be labelled, regardless of whether or not anyone had touched her. The elders would seek to make an example of her and would put honour above the exaltation of her return. I made it clear to her, in the simplest of terms, that she was going to die; be it by the hands of the village elders or by the hands of the Waqas tribe, her destiny had the same outcome.

I could see the moment she understood the ramifications of what I was telling her, and she stumbled lightly, holding on to one of the bars for support. And in that moment, I understood that the sheen in her eyes I’d seen earlier had been a natural shine, like a beacon to her beauty, and now the strength of real tears emerged from her eyes and rolled in drops down her cheek.

She tried so hard to argue with me, that it wasn’t anyone’s right to make a martyr of her, as though I held the keys to the cell and could make the decision to let her go. She understood fully, that her fate had been signed and sealed, and that she was now merely living on borrowed time.

She gasped for breath, hyperventilating, understanding the enormity of her situation.

I couldn’t erase her pain as she stood there looking defeated, knowing her days were numbered. I couldn’t offer her clemency or closure, or any of the things she sought to find in the mayhem of her short life. She was barely a child. Maybe just a year or two younger than Jihad. And I could see why he had probably taken such a keen interest in her-the age gap ensured he looked at her like a baby sister that he had to save at all costs.

Still standing at the door to the cell, I removed my hands from my pockets and looked at her carefully, trying to hide the effect that emotions ravaging through her were having on me. I hadn't quite made up my mind what I would do when I met the young girl, but now as I looked at her, assessing the situation and the tormented conflict shadowing her eyes, I realized there was only one thing I could do.

I made her an offer. One I knew she probably wouldn't want to take. But her only option, and the only one I could possibly put on the table.

“There is one other option, although you might not like it.”

“I'm facing a death penalty either way; what could be worse than that?”

## CHAPTER 15: HASSAN 1970

Of all the things I could have envisioned, a beautiful young girl with dark, almond shaped eyes and hair the black of the darkest night was not one of them. Farida had been a surprise. And I had wondered what sheer madness Shaikh Waqas suffered from, to have taken the girl then discarded her without so much as touching a hair on her head. And now he wanted to be rid of her. Because she was not the girl he had asked for. Sheer lunacy.

I had gone to the bunker with the intention of seeing the girl and consoling her, perhaps finding out who her parents were and sending word to them of the situation and seeing if they expressed an interest in saving her. But when I had seen her, and listened to the soft humming of her voice, something in me clenched at my chest, squeezing my heart for every last shred of compassion. Knowing her parents would take her back only to make a martyr of her. The only other option was that she would die at the hand of Shaikh Waqas, who had been a thorn in the side of all the local clans for years. His father had been a just ruler, revered by all his tribesmen and respected by all other shaikhs in the region. But upon his untimely death, his eldest son Turan had inherited his title, throwing the whole region into disarray with his foolish, ill thought out actions.

And now, it seemed, he had taken to removing girls from their families for his own deviant purposes. When those girls no longer served a purpose, they were simply discarded. The worst of it was that he had inherited his father's loyal soldiers, who, although never having done any of the dastardly deeds for the

deceased shaikh, were now being put in the unlikely position of having to hurt and dispose of innocents at the Sahikh's command.

And now, as I paced back and forth on the ground floor balcony, watching the sun disappear behind the horizon, I wondered at the unlikely turn of events that had brought Jihad to me, and Farida into my line of sight. I had gone to the Bunker more out of curiosity than anything else, and perhaps a misguided sense of offering Jihad a morsel of hope, but upon meeting Farida, everything had changed, and I had opened my mouth and delivered her the only alternative which I knew-almost certainly-would allow her a chance to live.

I had offered to marry her, even as the voice of reason deep inside me asked what I was doing. I had offered to marry her, knowing she would probably resist. I had offered to marry her, not knowing anything about her or her family, nor even having the slightest inclination to be married before I stepped into that bunker. I offered to marry her, knowing the situation wasn't as simple as it appeared to be, and there would need to be some negotiating with Shaikh Waqas to ensure her safety and her migration from one cell to another. Because essentially, marrying me, a man that she didn't even know, that's what she would be getting.

“What will you do?” Waleed asked, coming to stand behind me.

I shook my head in response, indicating that I had no idea. After meeting Farida, I had sent Jihad back to his own village, willing him to stay quiet and let me deal with the situation. He had tried to argue with me, telling me he had to know my plans for Farida, otherwise he would have to find another way to save her. I envied him his commitment but respected it, urging him once again to go back to the

village, and no matter what happened, no-one was to know that he had met with me. I told him I would protect him from any conversation that would arise with Shaikh Waqas about Farida, and I was a man of my word.

“You can’t let them kill her,” Waleed responded. “It’s wrong. Further, Shaikh Waqas’ behaviour is going to open the eyes of the police and bring them to our doorstep. He’s become a liability for the clans.”

My brother and I agreed on this, along with various other members of the neighbouring clans. However, having him deposed of his duties was no easy task, and with no-one to step in and lead the clan, we faced a turf war the likes of which we had never seen and only ever heard about from our forefathers.

“I don’t intend to let them kill her,” I told my brother.

“Do you think she’ll take you up on your offer of marriage?”

“I don’t see that she has much choice, brother,” I replied, squeezing his shoulder as I walked past him.

“Even if she does, how will you do it without starting an all out war with Waqas? Besides, you know that only his men know about the bunker-he’ll know someone has sold him out.”

“Set up a meeting with him tonight,” I said, looking out over the land thoughtfully. “I have a plan.”

## CHAPTER 16: HASSAN 1970

Shaikh Waqas was a cuckold, if nothing else. At every opportunity, he sought to show off and flaunt his wealth, conveniently forgetting that the riches he squandered were a product of his father's tireless work and efforts to bring stability to the region by opening trade with the outside world.

We entered what Waleed termed "the harem", so called for all the beautiful women floating around, all of them Waqas' wives or mistresses. I realized, with a lurch in the pit of my stomach, that this would have been Farida's fate had she been the girl he had requested. But for some reason, even with all her youth and beauty, Shaikh Waqas had not been taken with the girl and remained focused on obtaining the girl he originally sought.

Surprisingly, it was Jihad who collected us from the company of the guards and escorted Waleed and I, along with two of our own guards, down the long, narrow hallway to a huge room scattered with throw rugs, cushions and pillows, on which we were to sit. He had looked at me in surprise, a momentary flash of fear crossing his face, before he regained his composure, straightened his back, and asked us to follow him. A true soldier, not allowing his emotions to betray him. Willing to lose his life for a just cause. Capable of facing the consequences of his actions if it came to that.

Shaikh Waqas was not waiting for us in the room when we entered. In true cuckold fashion, he sought to make an entrance, entering a few minutes after us, his back heavy with a thick robe heavily embroidered with spun gold. He



welcomed us and waited for one of the women to catch his robe as he shrugged it off his shoulders. Once we were alone, with a feast of nuts and berries and enough exotic fruits to feed an army, Shaikh Waqas told us what a pleasure it was for him that we would honour him with a visit. Which was a polite way of asking us why we were there and what we wanted.

“We’ve been meaning to come a while,” Waleed stated, getting to the point “But we do have some pressing business to discuss.”

Shaikh Waqas looked up at us both, stopping mid-chew after he had popped a berry into his mouth.

“Business. We’ve not had the pleasure to work alongside one another before. But of course, I always welcome new opportunity.” Always the opportunist, Shaikh Waqas displayed his greed and played straight into my hands.

I grabbed some nuts in my hand as I tried to buy time and slowed my rapid breathing in an attempt to appear calm and collected. This proposal could go either one of two ways, but I knew I had to keep a level head as the discussion unfolded. I couldn’t appear too invested or concerned by his answer if it was not favourable to us.

“I was approached by a broker from another village not too far from here seeking a girl...”

And arrogant as he was, he cut me off before I could even finish off my sentence. “Well, if it’s a girl you’re after, you can take your pick,” he said, smiling as he clapped his hands together twice.

An array of young girls walked into the room, parading before us in a flurry of colourful garments. Pinks and yellows and blues and greens, each more beautiful than the other. Waleed and I watched as the girls shuffled past us, feigning interest out of politeness, but having no urge to share in Shaikh Waqas’ hobbies.

“I wouldn’t know the girl in question, but it is important that I locate her. I thought she may have been brought or even offered to you,” and the air lingered with my unspoken accusation that he was the man to see when it came to locating lost girls.

“Why don’t you tell me more and lets see if I can help you. Why is this girl significant? And why are you involved?”

“The girl’s father has been searching for her. She was taken from the Boden olive grove a few months ago.” I saw a tiny flicker in Shaikh Waqas’ eyes before he was able to mask it by propping another berry in his mouth.

“And her significance to you? I wouldn’t imagine this is the kind of work you’ve built your fortune on.”

“Most of our olive oil consumption here in the lowlands derives from that olive grove. They offer the finest oil in the quantities we require.”

Shaikh Waqas nodded his head in agreement “They do offer the best oil.”

“Our purchasing power means they sell solely to us, and we on sell to the neighbouring villages and the South of Lebanon, and further afar to other countries in the Middle East. As you know, this is a lucrative business. Not only financially; we all benefit from the best raw, undiluted olive oil in the country.”

He shook his head again and waited for the punchline.

“The parents have spent the past few months looking for their daughter, with no success.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with you,” Shaikh Waqas said, and if it wasn’t for me having to respect him in his own home, I would have held up my hand to wordlessly tell him that I was coming to that.

“The shaikh has asked me to intervene to see if I can find the girl and return her to her home.”

“You and I both know the ways of the clans, Hassan. No girl is accepted back into the fold after leaving the family home.”

“She didn’t leave, Shaikhna, she was taken,” Waleed interrupted. “The parents may have sought clemency and been granted it.”

“I still don’t understand why you were approached. And what this has to do with me.”

“The olive oil deal is a long standing agreement between myself and the village broker. They’re considering voiding the contract if the girl is not returned. Once we lose the contract, it’s gone for good.”

Shaikh Waqas sat up straight and lifted his chin in defiance. I knew he understood the severity of the situation once I mentioned losing the contract. A contract that brought in several hundred thousand dollars in revenue annually. A contract which was not only profitable for all the Shuyookha in the region, but it also provided countless jobs for men and women who worked in the plant bottling the oil for export and the truck drivers who transported the oil to various locations. The loss of this one contract could prove to be a devastating economic blow to the clans.

He also understood, like a lightbulb coming on in his head, that if he was found to be the one who took the girl, that all the other shuyookha would turn on him and he would most definitely become an outcast, denounced and discarded like he never existed.

“Again, what does this have to do with me?” he asked, playing coy.

“No-one mentioned your name, Shaikh Turan. I have merely come to you hoping that you are able to give me information regarding who may have the girl so I can return her to her family and uphold the integrity of the contract.”

For a long time, he did not say anything. He looked down at the table, then grabbed another berry and put it in his mouth. If nothing, I would have learnt tonight that the shaikh is fond of berries.

“I may have been offered a girl who was taken from that olive grove. Give me some more identifiers and let me see if I can find something for you.”

“Do you think he bought it?” Waleed asked me as we drove away into the night.

“He bought it. Didn’t you see him? He all but pissed himself when I mentioned we might lose the contract.”

“Do you think he’ll come through? The way I read him, he’s the type that would kill her just to cover up his misdeeds.”

I clucked my tongue and shook my head. “He won’t kill her. But he will lie through his teeth and say he had nothing to do with it when he hands her over. He’ll make himself out to be the hero, having recovered her from a band of robbers. When we all know, this is what he’s spent his life doing-taking what is not his for his own amusement.”

Shaikh Waqas sent word to the village the next morning that he had found the girl and knew her whereabouts. The only condition, he said, was that he could not reveal who took her or where she'd been held for the duration of her capture, and the girl's captor demanded a promise that this would not be delved into in order for the girl to be released. That in itself told me she had been held under his instruction. I sent word back to him that she was to be delivered to my village at the earliest possible time so we could organise for her to be returned to her family.

At the same time, I met with Jihad secretly and secured Farida's positive response to my proposal. He informed me that Shaikh Waqas was planning to move Farida tomorrow, and an envoy would be depositing her to the village so the exchange could take place.

"Won't he be suspicious when the girl ends up married to you?" Jihad asked, like he had every right to do so.

"He won't care. As long as the girl is out of his hair and he doesn't have to sully his hands with her. He may be curious, but he won't do anything about it. Especially not after I float the rumour of how the girl was not accepted back into the village so I had to marry her."

