

## Chapter One

# ORANGE

‘I CAN’T DRAW! There’s too much noise outside!’ I shout to Yasmine.

‘Adam, calm down and just continue Habibi!’

‘Yasmine, tell the kids to yes, yes, yes, stop making noise! They listen to you.’

Yasmine lowers her head. She does that when things are difficult to explain. I don’t like it.

‘Adam Habibi, you’re old enough to understand this is the beginning of a war.’

Mama never used to shout at me. It’s at times like these that I miss her the most. Yasmine’s fingers ruffle through her hair, her fingers look frail, just like the number one. I feel sorry for the number one, it seems lonely. So I think I feel sorry for Yasmine too. Yasmine lifts her head up now. That means she is not upset. Her eyes look like the number eight, friendly and sad.

‘Yes I’m 14, does that make you happy Yasmine? What do you mean a war? Do you mean like in Dighton’s paintings? But I can’t see that from the window. Look here Yasmine, kids are just running around. No one is wearing uniforms.’

Yasmine closes her eyes. She looks green. She is usually ruby. That’s my favourite colour. I use it in most of my paintings. I remember when mama used to say I should never stop painting. She promised she would keep my paintings with her.

But now they have to stay with me.

‘It’s okay Yasmine, I’ll just paint with the noise.’

Yasmine blows me a kiss. We do this to show our love. Before she died, mama told her that she should blow me a kiss every time she is proud or happy with me. Mama used to do that to me because she understood I don’t like people touching me.

‘Yasmine, do you like my painting?’

‘It’s lovely Adam, but why not try painting something new for a change?’

Yasmine always says this. She thinks I paint the same picture. I don’t. No two pictures are ever the same. It’s hard to explain that to her. She starts walking away, so I don’t need to explain anything. The colours are always different. I sometimes use pastel colours and at other times harsh bright colours. All the paintings have different feelings behind them. I wish Yasmine would understand this like mama used to. I feel content now so I use a lot of turquoise. I continue painting until it is time for Baba to come back home.

Baba comes back home every day at 4:48 p.m. He doesn’t even need to ring the bell any more. He knows I’ll be waiting to open the door for him at that exact minute. It has been like this for three years, ever since mama died. He looks more tired every passing day. The bags under his eyes are clearer now. I blow a kiss onto them every night hoping they will go away. I don’t like seeing him tired. Yasmine has the hot water ready for Baba to soak his feet as soon as I open the door. He is never a minute late and is always holding a bag full of papers to mark. When he is not too tired he even stamps them with colourful words like ‘well done’ and ‘excellent’. I like to help

him when he uses the stamps. They're fun to play with. Baba sometimes complains about me playing with the elastic band around my wrist. He says the sound annoys him, but I can't let go of it. It has to always be on my wrist. It helps me think.

Yasmine has made stuffed vegetables. It is the 26th of January and mama isn't looking down on us today. I love stuffed vegetables: they are like a bowl of emotions because they are very colourful. I sometimes imagine the peppers arguing with each other because they all feel differently. 'I feel melancholy in this bowl of food', the red pepper would say. 'Oh red pepper, how can you feel that way? You should be so angry that we are going to be eaten,' the aubergine would frown. My imagination sometimes takes hold of me and I get louder.

Yasmine always brings me back, reminding me that we shouldn't be too loud because Baba is tired. When Yasmine cooks six peppers, I know that mama is watching over us, because mama always made six stuffed peppers. Today there are five on the plate. This makes me sad, but it's okay, mama is probably resting. She is ill and needs some rest. I sometimes wonder if mama eats stuffed vegetables and baklava in heaven. I know they have a lot of yummy food up there but this is her favourite dish. Yasmine sometimes sighs and smiles a weak yellow smile when I tell her about how I know when mama is watching over us. I can't explain why some things are true. But I am sure this is true. I don't lie. The definition of a lie is an intentional false statement. It confuses me. Why do people lie? They say one thing, but it didn't actually happen and so that means something else happened. So two things happened according to them but that doesn't make sense either. Why can't they just say the one thing that actually happened? My

brain hurts when I think about it. I don't understand some people.

Mama died when I was 11. I miss her. She always told me I should be good and go to university to show people my paintings. I can't wait to go to university. My classmates say I belong to the special needs class and not university. They are stupid and wrong, says Yasmine. I don't like meeting new people, so I won't speak to anyone in class at university. So many people like to create small talk. I don't see the need for it. It's silly and a waste of time. I don't know why people don't realise this.

Khalid, Tariq and Isa come in and join the table. They are all the same age and at university. They are triplets. Even though they look alike they all have different colours. Khalid is orange, Tariq is teal and Isa is green. That's how I tell them apart. Orange brother always smiles and looks cheerful, he is the one who makes all the jokes in the house. Teal brother always gets me chocolate and comes home the latest. Green Isa is the quietest. He doesn't study architecture like the other two, he studies Arabic literature instead. Hardly anyone notices his presence, but it's hard for me to overlook his aura.

'Yasmine, can I get up from the table please?'

'You didn't even finish your food Adam.'

Everyone is sharing from a plate in the middle of the table but I always need a plate of my own. I don't like my food touching anybody else's. So Yasmine can tell I hardly ate. I don't get up from the table but keep fidgeting and start banging my feet on the ground. Yasmine ignores me. I don't like it when she does that but if I say anything she'll make me eat and I don't want to. I wait until everyone else excuses themselves from the table. Yasmine is upset I think. Her face looks long. When her face is round she is happy. I have a long face when I

think of mama. My heart feels bloody and black, I can't smile at anything. I try not to think of mama much because I don't like the feeling. I don't know why I feel that way when I think of her but I am too scared to ask too many questions about it. I just try to forget. Now that I am trying to forget about thinking of mama I can't stop. I hate it when this happens.

The violet colour of her death that came out of her coffin is now stuck in my mind. I can sometimes go days without thinking about it, but when I start, it is hard to stop. She looked like snow. Not made of snow, but just a pile of snow in a box, messy and about to melt and turn into water. I wanted to touch mama and see if she felt as cold as snow but Yasmine said it would be better not to. Mama's hair looked like a pigeon sitting on the snow. It is scary to remember it. I feel sick now. I'm scared.

I leave the sitting room and run to my room since it's not my turn to help in the kitchen today. I always open my door, count to three, take a step back and jump onto my bed from the door. I never step on the carpet between the door and the bed. If I do it means I won't have a good day. Even when I am too tired to jump I have to. Being in my room makes me feel warm and brown. I love the feeling, the feeling means home. My window is dusty and it hurts my eyes. I need to clean it, now. I jump to the window and try to blow the dust away. It's from the outside. It doesn't usually get this dusty. Maybe a sandstorm is coming. I can still see through the window but if I let the dust grow it will slide into my room and turn into a big weird creature that will eat me when I am not looking. It always happens in the horror movies that Yasmine doesn't like me watching. There are no children running outside like usual. The café opposite my window has the chairs on the ta-

bles. The name 'Al-Sham' is full of dust and the café seems like it is abandoned and empty.

## Chapter Two

# VIOLET

I SOMETIMES PRETEND I'm a dinosaur who is complaining about being the last one left here, not having anyone to play with and who eats humans who don't want to play with him. Sometimes I even pretend I'm living in the Stone Age and hunting for food, like in *The Flintstones*. It's so much fun to pretend I am someone else. I am good at playing games like that. When I am in bed and the lights are off I imagine I am a firefly glowing in the dark looking for a mate like in *Grave of the Fireflies*, but I never imagine I am a scary insect because then I won't be able to sleep.

The sun just came out. I always wake up as soon as there's light. I just can't sleep with light outside and I don't like closing the curtains because I feel trapped. I was once playing hide-and-seek with Khalid and I hid under the bed and he couldn't find me. Mama then called him and he forgot about the game. I waited for hours. After that I hated small and dark spaces. They're scary.

I can look outside my window when I sit up on my bed. The street outside is still empty and now even dustier. The café is still not open and I can see posters all over the walls. It must really be a sandstorm or maybe a war like Yasmine said. I jump up to the window to read what the posters say but I can't read them from this far. I look at my watch. It's Saturday. I don't have school today so I can't go outside. I only go out when I have school. I don't have any other reason to go out-

side otherwise. I will have to wait to read what the posters say. I can smell coffee from the kitchen. I hate the taste but I love waking up to the smell. I can hear the sound of the television from the sitting room. No one is usually up this early on Saturday apart from Yasmine and me. I jump back on my bed and then to my door to see who is watching television. I want to watch my morning show about modern art but I guess today I won't be able to. I walk five steps then turn one foot to the right and put the other foot down and count three steps to the sitting room.

The sitting room looks like a messy art canvas with bright colours. My eyes squint. It's too colourful for me in the morning. The whole family is sitting around the television. Everyone has their duvets on them. I wonder how long they have been there for. The breakfast is still on the table: red and yellow peppers cut up on a plate and five coffees with labna in a bowl. I miss mama's labna, she made the best.

Nobody turns around to see me come into the sitting room. I wonder what is going on. I guess it is because of the sandstorm. It can't really be a war. No one is dressed in army clothes. On the screen, there are huge groups of people on the streets protesting with banners but I can't read them from here.

'The revolution in the Arab world has been going on for nearly nine months and now Syria is facing upheaval,' says the voice-over in a tone almost as if a vicious array of metallic pins were rushing out of her mouth. I can't watch any more.

Yasmine gets up to go to the kitchen and sees me standing there.

'Adam, go wash up and I'll make you breakfast.'

'What's going on Yasmine? Are we protesting as well? I thought there was a sandstorm.'

‘Sandstorm? Oh Adam, just go wash up.’

‘Yasmine, why don’t you tell me?’

‘Adam, there is no sandstorm. There is going to be a war. A real war, we are going to go and protest tomorrow.’

‘I have school tomorrow Yasmine, I can’t go protesting.’

‘You can’t go to school Habibi, you can stay home with Isa.’

‘But I have to go to school, I can’t miss any classes.’

‘Oh Adam... Habibi because of the war, there is no school. Everyone is out protesting. School will start again soon, I promise.’

‘Okay Isa and I will stay home Miss,’ I say and run towards the bathroom, through the kitchen, without stepping on any black tiles and then jump into the bathroom from three steps back. I brush my teeth with a perfect pea-sized amount of toothpaste. I have a pea I keep in my cupboard to compare the size. I brush three strokes to the right, then three strokes to the left. I then brush three strokes up and down and spit in the middle of the sink.

In the shower I think about school. There is only one boy I like in class, Nabil. He is the only one who is nice and doesn’t make fun of me. He even buys me lunch sometimes, but he is usually out of money. I don’t mind sharing my lunch with him, but I don’t let him touch the part I am going to eat.

‘I have a surprise for you,’ he once said as he rushed into the room and sat next to me.

I moved my chair a little away from him, he was too close and his breath was in my face. It smelled of coffee and chewing gum. I love the smell of coffee, but not on someone’s breath.

‘Hello Mister. How are you today?’

‘Fine Adam, guess what? I got the “Guild Wars”!’

‘Really Mister! That is fantastic! Can I play with you?’

‘Of course, that’s why I came to you. Do you want to come over and play with me?’

‘Come over where?’

‘Do you want to come to my house?’

‘I don’t know where your house is Mister.’

The shampoo is about to get into my eyes. But my super fingers stop it just in time. If they hadn’t I wouldn’t have spoken to anyone today. It’s bad luck to speak when it happens. I have ten minutes to wash up and change because it was so close to getting into my eyes. I finish in exactly ten minutes.

‘Yasmine, I’ve finished.’

‘Yes Habibi, I can see. You smell lovely.’ She blows me a kiss.

‘I’m as hungry as a lion!’

‘Did you learn that at school?’

‘No, I was watching a documentary on TV about lions. The man said that lions get very hungry.’

Yasmine laughs so I start to laugh too. Her laugh is funny; it’s like scraping an apple on a shiny wet surface.

‘What would you like for breakfast Mr Cheeky?’

‘Tea and labna please Miss Pretty.’

‘How do you say tea in Japanese Adam?’

‘Why do you want to know? Nobody ever asks me about my Japanese.’

‘Well nobody speaks Japanese here. So tell me how do you say tea?’

‘Ocha.’

‘Ota?’ She laughs with her head facing upwards. I don’t know why people tilt their head back when they laugh loudly. I think the pharynx needs more space for so much laughter. ‘Ota? Like a cat in Egyptian? Would you like to drink a cat?’ Her laughter is so squeaky.

‘No Yasmine! O-CH-A!’

‘Ocha? Oh, it’s not funny any more, would you like some OTA?’ she slowly mouths to tease me.

‘Ocha o hitotsu kudasai!’

I quickly run off while laughing at Yasmine. I love Yasmine, she makes me happy. When we play like this, she becomes my favourite and most vibrant colour, my colour ruby.

‘What? Come back here! What does that mean? Come back you cheeky boy! I’ll throw my slipper at you!’

I keep running without stepping on any yellow design on the carpet. When I reach the sitting room I hide behind Baba.

‘Shh Adam, we are watching the news!’

I don’t say another word and try to keep my laughter inside. Everyone looks so tired and upset. Maybe it’s because they miss mama. It can’t be because of the war. A war is a state of armed conflict between different nations or states or different groups within a nation or state. There is no conflict in Syria for there to be a war. The dictionary doesn’t lie, so if that’s what it says, that’s what I believe.

The day is going by slowly. I finish breakfast and leave the sitting room. It is too boring to sit around, watch the news and listen to the family talk about politics. I walk to my room and think about what book to read today. I have just borrowed *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann from the library. I think I will start reading it.

The main character’s name looks grey, which means I won’t like him. Gustave Aschenbach is a very dark name; he must be bad. I don’t want to finish the book in case it upsets me. Thinking about it forms hexagons in my mind with bees roaming around the shape, stinging. He certainly is a bad character then. Just the thought of reading on scares me.

The dark image I have in my head from just the first page of the book makes me want to paint. I walk over to the corner of my room and open all the lids of the colours on the table as I sit up on the chair. My paintbrush darts for the grey colour. I have a better idea though. I pick up the bottle of grey paint and splash it on the white paper. The paint runs down and before it dries I dip my paintbrush in orange. I draw a thin outline of tired looking eyes that reflects a flame in the pupils. I draw as delicately as possible so the details are fine and noticeable. I pick up a thinner brush and dip it into a midnight blue colour and trace a fine line around the pupils so the orange and blue simultaneously show the fear in the eyes. The grey in the background has mixed with orange and dried now. All together it looks like the aftermath of a war.

I move my chair back to see the picture from afar. I feel it reach out to talk to me, telling me something is missing. I re-evaluate the three colours. The unexpected clash of grey and orange shows the dark results of the war but also reflects a thin glimmer of hope. The midnight blue around the pupils speaks to me and tells me of the horrors it has witnessed. A lighter colour is missing: white. The sky should be painted white to mock the supposed ending of the war and show the naivety that still remains.

I pick up my white paint and carefully spill it at the top of the canvas. I put a piece of paper under it so there is a perfect line and so it doesn't interfere with the other colours. I then wait five minutes for it to dry before removing the paper.

I can hear weird sounds coming from outside all of a sudden. They sound like the howls of angry wolves. I never knew we had wolves in Aleppo. It is exciting to hear them but I am scared. Why would wolves be howling like this? I run out of my room quickly and look for Yasmine.

‘Yasmine! I can hear wolves! Yasmine!’

‘Come in Adam, what’s wrong Habibi?’

‘Yasmine, can you hear the wolves outside? Come, I’ll show you!’

I lead Yasmine to the front of the house and keep my eyes on her face. Her eyes look so small. I think she is scared. I have never seen her eyes this small apart from at mama’s funeral. She must be scared or upset, but why should she be upset because of the wolves?

‘Yasmine what’s wrong?’

‘The protests have started darling, they’re coming down our street.’

‘Is this what you meant by the start of the war?’

‘Yes, the boys and I have to join the crowd Adam, you stay home with Isa.’

‘I thought you were going tomorrow? You can’t go today, it’s not time yet.’

‘I thought we would be going tomorrow too but I have to go today.’

Yasmine runs to the sitting room and calls out to Khalid and Tariq to get dressed and ready. I don’t feel too good, maybe it’s because I am scared. What if something happens to them? Things always happen in wars. There’s always blood in war paintings, all of them. What if they come home covered in blood?

The loud sounds come closer and now they sound like a huge crowd of angry people shouting. I can’t make out what they’re saying. I go to the front door and open it to get a closer look. The crowd is still in the distance but they are so loud I can hear them from here. They look like a huge army of ants approaching. In one of William Hogarth’s paintings there is a

crowd of people who look like they are protesting as well, he paints the picture with splashes of red to portray the forecast of the bloody war. I would do the same. I see blood coming.

Yasmine, Tariq and Khalid leave. I walk them to the door and hope I don't see anything yellow today because that means they won't come back safe.

'Want to watch TV with me Adam?' Isa walks behind me.

'Yes, let's watch an art show.'

We flip through the TV channels and settle on MBC1, which has an art show. It's 1:00 p.m. I had lost track of time. Of course, my art show is on repeat at 1:00 p.m.

The episode today is about the death of art. The TV presenter is talking about how true art of expression and depth has died and simplicity has taken its place. It is disappointing to hear this. Real art should never die if it is real, it is just hidden behind the layers of ignorance. This show is sending the wrong message out to people. So many people are listening to this and believing it.

'Believe in this?' Isa asks me.

'Of course not, real art still exists, some people just want to create new art so they forget about the origins and truth of it.'

'Very clever of you, I would have never thought that. Why don't you show me some of your paintings?'

'I only show mama and Yasmine.'

'Why don't you try showing me? I'll be honest.'

I don't know whether I should show him or not. What if he laughs? I only trust mama and Yasmine. He said he'd give me an honest opinion so maybe I should.

'Don't tell anyone I showed you okay?'

I lead him into my room. He doesn't jump over the thresh-

old so I'm not sure if I feel comfortable with him being here.

'Wow Adam, there are paintings everywhere, that's amazing!'

'Do you like them?'

'Amazing, I never knew you were this good, I always just saw you go into your room and come out hours later, but I didn't think you did such good paintings.'

'Thank you Mr. Isa.'

'Why do you always paint war?'

'Because it's filled with endless painting possibilities, and the range of colours is so wide.'

'Why don't you try making sculptures?'

'I like using colours.'

'But you're good with faces.'

'Thank you Isa...'

Before I am able to finish my sentence I hear a loud shriek, gun shots and an ambulance siren. I freeze in my place. Yasmine is all I can think about.

'Yasmine... Yasmine... Yasmine!'

'Calm down Adam, let's go out and see what's going on. Don't worry it won't be Yasmine.'

'I can't go out, I can't.'

I run to the door and open it clumsily, the lock isn't unlocking. Isa pushes me aside gently and unlocks it. I stretch my neck out of the door to see if I can see what happened. All I can see from here is a group of people with banners marching on, and an ambulance in the far distance. The fear of something happening to my sister burns inside me. My fingers start to tremble and twitch. I back away from the door and sit in the corner of the corridor towards the wall. I grind my teeth trying to ignore all the dark thoughts that start clouding my

mind. I can't see the wall in front of me any more; I can only see grey triangles covering my vision. My body starts rocking involuntarily. I try to stop it, but it rocks more violently as I count in my head.