Fragile Boundaries

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For Rashid and Zeina

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"Whoso has done an atom's
weight of good shall see it;
and whoso has done an atom's
weight of evil shall see it."

Surah 99: 7-8,
The Koran

CHAPTER I

The day was preparing to brighten, to vapourise the park's mist and scarf trails of weakening fog, dissipating it like dry ice across the stage. It was never a place for solitude, even at that early hour. There were too many others running, gaudily dressed adherents to the virtuous addiction of the morning, kick-start jog. Through the fog's thinning veil Jayda Talhoun pounded her footfalls, resenting each person she ran past as an intruder into her private battle: the mountain of determination that she had to scale each morning to get to the paths of Hyde Park and push herself into sweat, past the sleepiness and warmth of her bed, her throat's dryness and the dull, sapping ache rising up in rebellion against sudden physical effort. Of all her London mornings, she had not failed to do so yet.

It was a fight to be a morning person. No one had demanded it of her but she had decided years ago that to create her own luck needed unusual application. There were plenty of her type at university in London — single, upper class Arab women — but she did not want to spend much time perpetuating a similar social roundhouse to that she could find in Amman. It was true that there was more freedom in London, away from the prying suffocations of family. There was space to be wild and unobserved, with no social tracking

structure, always being somewhere where someone knew who you were. Well, up to a point. Parents and elder brothers might not find out who you partied with but contemporaries certainly did and embraced every event with the commentary of social media. It might not be the same crowd as at home but there were the invisible connections. Such as that medical undergrad from Bahrain she half-liked and who undoubtedly liked her; he had a cousin in Kuwait who was an old friend of one of her brother's fellow officers. There was always a connection.

To ease the irritations of rising early and getting there and to distract herself from the boredom of running, she allowed herself fantasies. In them she imagined she was powerful: a diplomat resolving a crisis, a Prime Minister advising the King or even a Chief of Staff berating generals in a war. Public roles for which women were not favoured. She considered herself in a fight for opportunities to prove herself. When she was little and playing doctors and nurses with her brother, why had she always been the nurse? 'What shall I do when I grow up?' 'Marry,' was the reply, from everyone she asked. She was offended by what she saw as the overwhelming, ubiquitous culture of Arab misogyny. Jordan had been liberal even without the violent cleansing of an Arab Spring, had always been a place of tolerance and conservative progression. No barely literate Salafi lunatics preached hatred and suppression, at least not publicly. It was a mild,

uneventful sort of place, officially friendly through the financial imperatives of both Gulf petrodollars and Western tourists. Jordan was her birthplace and best chance. If she could not rise to the top there she would have betrayed her own luck. It did not occur to her whether this was feminism, but it was her struggle.

Mostly, she imagined running the family businesses with her father and brother uninvolved. The large, light-flooded corner office on the highest floor that was her father's would be her own, with the secretaries and managers responding to her directions. Her picture on the magazine cover, with four pages of profile inside. Even when, from some modesty connected to her sense of reason, she had to pause these thoughts and feel the aching rhythm of the run reduce her ambition to the immediate boredom of continuing, she reassured herself that such thoughts were necessary. At its core, Arab sensibility was the family. The man to create and protect it. The woman to be wife, mother, mistress and servant of it. Children for family and family before tribe and nation. Family for Islam and yet, even if Islam improbably dissolved under a secular sun of western affluence to a mere lifestyle choice, there would still be the kernel of the Arab family with pressure to marry, to breed and to obey. Family would one day consume her and maybe, then, she would want it. She just had to find reason to justify delaying it.

The irony was that Jayda adored her father. His expectations for her were conventionally prosaic, as

were her mother's, but she could sense his weakness, that he loved her to indulgence. So a series of charming manipulations had led her to university in London and, from that, to the panting circumnavigation of a misty park at seven in the morning, four hours before her first lecture. Whether this period was a brief blip of independence before Amman swallowed her again in rounds of social trivia and then marriage to a man vetted by her parents, or was the pause before the curtain was raised to her career, she could not, if she was honest, predict with any certainty.

Heat prickled upon her sweating skin against the disappearing cool of the morning. The adhesive dryness in her throat cried for water she did not have and began to make her breaths raspingly painful. She was halfway through her usual run and it felt harder than ever before. The urge to surrender to a walk was strong, to suspend the discomforts in pausing motion, to rest, and she began to shudder to a stop. A pair running side by side, man and woman earnest in matching fluorescent skins, overtook her. It annoyed her. She frowned her ignition, clamped her teeth and powered on.

Cosy Cheshire always allowed herself the luxury of time when preparing for parties. Her toilet was no lengthier than any other self-respecting woman's but the preparation seemed to be more emotionally complicated. She loved and feared invitations in

equal measure, finding them generally impossible to refuse and the signal for chasms of malaise-seeping apprehension. For this one she tried to gain control by closing her shop early again and spending most of the two hours of captured time in an indulgence of indecision about which outfit to wear. Half a dozen were splayed across the bed, all dissimilar, all her own designs. She exhaled and allowed herself the sort of earnest frown she imagined was attractive but knew gave her nothing but wrinkles. There was the black leather catsuit that advertised adventure and sexual power; the soft rose-pink imitation Chanel suit for a demure posture; a lime green matching set and flat shoes that emitted confidence; a dark, richly coloured, high collared cheongsam for an oriental pose; a billowing white dress and three pastel blouses for when she felt too fat and hot in summer and, of course, her version of the classic black cocktail dress with its suggestive curve-clinging lines and slits. The prospect of making a choice seemed overwhelming until hunger pangs distracted her again. As she stood beside the bed, in growing undecided pain, the ever-present emptiness in her belly groaned and Cosy remembered, with a cold shiver that did not seem to start from anywhere but filmed her in sweat all at once, that she must keep the scars on her arms covered. She clutched herself, rocking from toes to heels repeatedly as the shiver calmed itself away, frowning at her predicament in fear. What if she knew no-one there? What if no-one

new liked her? What if she had to return home that night with the haunting sense that it had all been for nothing — her preparations, her faux confidence, laughter and smiles, to stumble from a taxi half-drunk and alone, returning to a dark, untidy house? Waves of nausea began to crinkle throughout her from the weakness fuelled by virtually no food all day, so she gulped air several times and forced herself steady. After a smile at her self-control she began hastily to take off her clothes, dropping them forcefully behind her as if they disgusted her. Only a breakfast apple and several sugared mugs of coffee had passed her lips but still her belly felt slightly swollen.

Naked and suddenly conscious of the exposure she rubbed herself randomly with her hands. Turning to a full length mirror she examined her face, searching for any immediate truth. Whether her mood was now fear, boredom or both she could not tell. A default narrative of self assurance advanced within her allowing her arms to drop from their hug and place themselves upon her hips, giving a more confident, critical posture. She was, she thought, still pretty. Still blonde but with browning roots, her skin not fresh, but there was enough of an outline of past beauty to yet give her a chance of filling the great void at the centre of her existence, the absence of someone to share it with. So, sighing within, she had to go to the party.

Her eyes rested their critical gaze not on the flat slimness of the torso reflecting back to her but on her

knees, the wrinkled knolls of which were blotchy pink and strangely incongruous upon the mainly clear alabaster of her skin. They revealed her age like the backs of her hands. She needed to summon her reserves of bravery and glanced to a half-full bottle of vodka and glass by her bedside lamp. The thought of taking a drink reminded the pinpoint of her Adam's Apple of the reflux of bile that was likely to erupt from within after swallowing but she needed to create some layers of courage before the party began. She paced to the bathroom next door, her toes appreciating the carpet's depth with each ponderous step, her nakedness feeling free and daring in the walk, to place herself kneeling delicately astride the glaring ceramic of the lavatory, one arm steadying the seat and her toes now flexing an arch to tip herself forward as the other hand, with mechanical grace, reached into her throat to tickle out a small convulsion of puke.

CHAPTER II

There was a sweet lift of cooling breeze, unexpected and sudden, through the open window of Jad Talhoun's study. The day was already hot. A wave of jasmine, baked thick as if it had been heated in confinement, rose and surprised him, dissipating his concentration. Having finished his task he placed his pistol with careful precision to one side of the desk on top of its case. Stripping down and reassembling the weapon he kept at home was a ritual he repeated every Friday after breakfast as the weekend started. His was a collector's edition Pietro Beretta 92 F, its handle polished mahogany, its screws brass, its barrel not yet fired in anger. It was an expensive tool for a home security policy, one he liked.

Jad took a cigarette from a red lacquer box upon the desk and walked to the window. The leather surface of the desk behind him was overlaid with neatly spaced sheets of paperwork, the weekly reports and financials from his companies, spread out and then ignored. The jasmine was still strong as he exhaled his first drag in a plume. Looking upon his garden with mild curiosity, he regarded with a proud smile its grass, green and coarse-leafed. Most Amman villas squatted their expanse upon all their allotted space, leaving little but paved driveway to breathe around them but Jad's father

had built this mansion when the surrounding land was dust. Sprinklers whirred their continual clicking mists. Dense shrubs hugged the perimeter, colours of mainly variegated greens and yellows forming a controlled, angular jungle bordering the lawn's ordered lines. Behind this fringe was a whitewashed wall, 12 feet of even brickwork topped with embedded broken glass. The city beyond the wall, subdued because it was a Friday, hazed its immediacy behind a fat, blurring heat. Flat-roofed white and sandstone buildings and the glass stumps of offices seemed to warp in baked vision. The surrounding sounds travelled softly to mesh in a blanketing backdrop of urban noise. He could identify nothing that could give off the scent but still he stood there, raising his eyebrows wide in contented interest and smoking with relaxed ease.

The door behind him opened softly, turning him in response. The new weekend maid, whose name he could not remember, bobbed herself in and avoided his gaze. She placed down a tray trembling with Turkish coffee, water and unwanted biscuits. Thoughtless as to what papers she had covered she slipped out as quickly as she had come, leaving the door ajar but with a backward glance at the pistol, its smooth dull metal enhanced in an arrow of sunlight.

His family was elsewhere: his wife visiting friends, his eldest still in his room, his spoilt daughter abroad and the two youngest playing together on the top floor, half in argument, their urgent sounds reaching

him muffled. On a bookshelf behind the desk rested a framed photograph of him seated outside with his daughter, Jayda, draping an arm over him, her smile beside his, her face presenting a beguiling freshness. He missed her. She had now been in London nearly three months. When he stared at the picture it seemed to him an ungraspable surprise of nature that his genes had contributed to a creature of such beauty.

When Jayda had proposed that she study in London he had realised it was her way of escaping, although that explanation was avoided. Despite his hesitations in granting consent she had been, as always since her earliest smiles, too persistent for him to resist. Whilst he loved his wife with the honour and respect that every family man should, Jad adored his eldest daughter foremost. For him such concepts as romance and uxorious love were weaknesses to be shunned by an impregnable masculine facade. Not that his Zena seemed to be unhappy. They had been pushed together at an age when they were little more than children by two sets of parents whose consideration for their happiness was, initially, marginal. Happiness was expected to be found within the formula of marriage which the parents, the unquestionable authority, had decided upon. For Jad, the overwhelming reason his marriage was successful was because he had children. The purpose of his marriage was for his children. As for his wife's happiness, whilst he would, if asked, declare it he could not be certain because they had

never spoken of it. Whilst he did not regard himself as inconsiderate to such things, marital happiness and his own equilibrium were secondary, self-indulgent byproducts. Jad Talhoun was a man of position in Jordan but even more important to him than any status his businesses gave him, it was crucial to Jad to be a paterfamilias: a loud, loving, opinionated, generous, ursine, self-generatingly kinetic bubble of a man. Real men were family men.

The particular combination that was Jayda's character surprised and delighted him. The friendly brightness of her optimism usually pleased him, but it was the shocking unanswerability of her intelligence that was foremost in plying his emotions and prejudices. She had a tendency progressively to traject towards whatever ambition currently burned within her. It was a simple approach that he approved of. Her beauty he was proud of and the elegance of her movements he absorbed without noticing but they formed the subliminal essence of his adoration. Despite his paternal longing whilst she was away it did not occur to him to ring or text her, even though there was only an hour's difference at this season, even though he loved to talk to her and hear her soft, expressive tones, sensing sometimes through the babbling trivia and disproportionate worries of her concerns that he still mattered to her emotionally. It was deflating if she rang the house and he missed her but he would never impose himself. Above all, he wanted to feel needed.

Whilst still facing out to the garden Jad knew from an almost imperceptible alteration in the air behind him that someone was filling the doorframe. He turned to see the tall angularity of his son, hesitant on the threshold.

'Sabah al Khayr,' welcomed Jad.

'Ahlan.'

'Well, have you been thinking on my suggestion?' He moved inwards to behind his desk again, liking its physical barrier as an aid to the formality he needed, and stubbed out on a glass ashtray.

'Yes, Baba,' started Jamil at a volume louder than he had perhaps intended. 'I think I should like to go tomorrow. It would be useful for me to meet the insurance people.'

Jad blinked surprise at his son, not at the decision, which was what he had anticipated, but at the reason stated.

'Jamil, seriously? Would you not be going because you want to see Jayda?'

Jamil was a big man, like his father, but not yet thickened out. Only the cratered bags beneath both their eyes seemed to give similar physiognomies. Even their moustaches were different: Jad's a bushy greying tuft, his son's a thin black definition of self-consciousness. The son seemed exposed and nervous. He walked over to the window to look out as his father continued, 'Bijadd? Would not seeing Jayda be a better reason?'

'Perhaps, but the work needs to be done as well.'

'Of course.' Jad felt wryly amused. His son's foibles had long ceased to frustrate but now gave quiet entertainment to him in the natural course of their daily frictions. He knew that Jamil, his proud, awkward, shy, blustering, unmarried son, must miss his sister with unusual intensity. 'You could find out how she really is. Whether she is studying hard. Whether she has a boyfriend that we need to worry about.'

'Yes, I will.' Jamil hastened away with a couple of long jerky strides, avoiding his father's gaze, desperate to be away. 'I will make my preparations.'

Later that day Jamil was late for the Jummah Prayer despite his rigorous attention to motorised speed. This was something that particularly irritated him. Tall, ramrod, gangly but dexterous, he appeared stiff because that was how he felt comfortable. Driving fast had become part of his identity, his masculinity. Captain Talhoun had commanded tanks, Chieftains and Challengers in the 40th Royal Armoured Brigade, but now he drove his black BMW around Amman as if he still had the same sort of firepower. At least he could adjust the seat to meet his frame.

The sidewalks around the King Hussein Mosque were blocked with parked cars and so he had to park several streets away. A cigarette stitch tightened his chest and beads of sweat clammed his underarms as he ran in. The Adhan had abruptly ceased being broadcast from the minarets when he parked and it was nearly

a further five minutes of jarring his footfalls in a jog before he entered the courtyard.

He had been delayed by news which disturbed him in a way that surprised him. Every Friday morning Jayda rang from London and gabbled to each of them in turn. Today she spoke to mother first and mentioned she was going to a party the next night. That was, of itself, nothing, but it reminded him that with each passing week that Jayda was away in London, the further away she was growing apart from their influence. He had felt chilled and left the room for his own without a word; he smoked and felt the apprehension of not knowing but sensing an impending disaster. The nexus of his emotional ley lines felt strained. Five unenjoyed cigarettes, one after the other, had given no insight or challenge but enhanced the biting grey colour of his mood. He had managed to get to his car unseen.

Shoes and socks hastily discarded, he could hardly rush the ablutions. He crouched on the stone bench before a tap as he muttered the Bismillah in panting breaths whilst washing his hands, over and over like a preparing surgeon late for an operation. Then, leaning forward, he took in water to his mouth, swilling and spitting out three times. His nose hurt with the unnatural snorting of the water, cupped from his hands, three times up. Three times more he filled his cupped hands and dunked his face with messy, blasting splatters. There was no-one behind or alongside him to worry about. His right arm washed to the elbow, then

the left, each the three times. The ears with his fingers and then the culmination of this ritualised, compulsive cleansing: the washing of his feet up to the ankles, thrice, beginning with the right.

The dust of the desert now washed from him he paced with undignified haste into the main jamaca. It was, inevitably, crowded but was momentarily hushed. He joined the back row of the ruku, each bowing in their carpeted, proportioned, windowed space, in rows across the large expanse of the domed floor, a regulated community of humility.

Despite his rush he was less annoyed with his own faults than he was with the rest of his family. At least he was bothering to attend prayers. He realised that he was not perfect but his attempts to be devout were coupled with his understanding of duty, identity and honour. That his parents rarely came to the mosque and, indeed, rarely prayed at all counterpointed his own pride that he did so. There were days, weeks even, when he did not observe the five daily prayers, either at home or office and there were periods when he did; periods, usually, when he was troubled. Once, on an RJ flight home from London as he had crept, bleary and tired, to the front toilet cubicles he had nearly stumbled over the flight security guard bobbing his devotions at the ruku. The sight of the devotion, inconveniently observed, immediately jolted him from turpitude so he shuffled across the gangway past chattering hostesses, ignored the pressure upon his bladder and sank to his knees in

the small space in front of the opposite loo to join in the prayer. Impure with alcohol from the flight meal and not having ritually washed he nevertheless felt an overwhelming urge to observe prayer, the intonations rhythmic, natural, wholesome and reaffirming, the structure reassuring and allowing him to pray without reflection, without troubling the inchoate worries that compelled him.

'*Samia Allahou liman Hamidah,*' intoned the congregants and from somewhere hidden in front on his Dakka the imam incanted the reply, '*Allahumma rabbana wa Laka.*'

The imam intoned a reading from the Koran and, as so often, Jamil's thoughts wandered now to his own mix of prayer and prejudice as he knelt facing the rows of male backs, all silent and attentive, though shifting continually like small opposing waves.

'Allah Almighty, Specifically Merciful Lord, forgive my sins,' he prayed. 'Grant me a wife that I may honour you with children. Grant me prosperity that I may honour you with charity.' And then, with a shift of thought and intention, with no distinction in Jamil's mind as to degrees of purity of intent or appropriateness, he carried on, 'Almighty Allah, guide Jayda to find love, honour and respect with a Jordanian husband, a true, good Muslim, and bless her with many children.'

The prayers developed into the sermon and Jamil allowed his mind to rest, kneeling, observing

the sunlight cast down from the dome's open edges upon the assembled rows of men. It is a peaceful transcendence, the contentment earned from pious observances of regular prayer and Jamil felt a rare moment of untroubled ease but the imam's tone was rising in stridency, itself unusual.

'No matter how knowledgeable I am, not if I were the greatest and most insightful imam in the history of Islam could I condemn anyone, any infidel, any seemingly unclean and evil man, a takfiri. And why not? Because I am not Allah. Only Allah Almighty, the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Wise, the Just, can do that.'

The very worst that could happen would be for Jayda to fall in love with a godless man whilst she was away in London. If it were an Englishman he would most likely be an infidel and apostate, a kafir. As a stream of light rayed its bright column from the dome and shifted all other perspectives into shadow, Jamil squeezed his eyes shut away from the beam and prayed again that his sister could be guided to Allah; but the thought most acute to him at that moment was that such a temptation would appeal to her.

He was his father's son, he told himself. Babu may not be pious or as observing as he was, but he knew that their prejudices coincided, if only reached by different paths. Jayda was the child and beauty of the family, to be protected and guided by them both, to God, to marriage, to her future.