Chapter

Tangier – 2 Years Later

That same stranger who saved us at the café was sitting at a desk, gazing at me. His face was calm, compared to the one he showed in the café. He was a big man, dark from the sun, with a large nose like mine, and big ears below dark hair sprinkled with grey hair. The scars on his forehead and down his face make you not notice the big ears. Mine look like open car doors on a smooth street.

He's half Bedouin, half American. I'm all Bedouin… I think. My hair is shaggy and dark. It will look better when Salima cuts it again, but someone borrowed our scissors. Salima has long hair. She wouldn't let me cut her hair even when we had scissors. She's small, but knows what she wants. She thinks she knows what I should want too, but that's a different story.

We were standing side by side in front of his desk, waiting to see what brought us to this office for the first time since that day we arrived. Two of our tutors were sitting in padded wooden chairs on either side of the desk.

His name is Alejandro Mohammed Cuchulain.

Salima and I call him Cooch.

Cooch had fed and clothed us since the day at the café, the worst day and the best day I ever had.

Salima and I had agreed with Cooch that we would do whatever he asked in return for food and shelter. I figured we could always run away if it turned out to be a bad deal. We got everything we dreamed and whispered about back when we were sleeping in a stable somewhere or in an abandoned office or shop. Stables are warmer.

We lived in a small room with our own bathroom. It was a part of a huge office and manufacturing complex built into the mountains behind Tangier. We ate in the company cafeteria with Tang, who looked after us. There was a gym and a pool. We had a library. We studied with four tutors.

Tang taught us movement.

Doctor, an American woman with short, shaggy blond hair, taught us about math and computers. She had an office and a meeting room, both with lots of computers, hooked up to towers high upon the hills behind us.

Uncle Jerome, a big, dark American, taught us, mostly me, about how to survive in the outdoors without much help. And how to shoot. He also liked to run a lot, so he taught me that too.

Cooch taught us, mostly me now, about Islam and history. He had tutors, Islamic scholars and philosophers mostly, come in to talk to me. Sometimes we talked together at night when one tutor arrived before another left. Just the arriving tutor, the departing tutor, Cooch and me. Those were really fun times. Cooch knows a lot about Islam and its history. We used meeting rooms near Cooch's office mostly. He didn't let many people in his office if it was not business.

Salima mostly went with Doctor now. They discussed math things and swam. I swam OK, but I didn't like to talk so much about math. I did the work, but Doctor wanted more than that. She wanted me to feel 'the structure of math in my soul." I didn't, but I did the work OK. Doctor got structure and soul thinking from Salima, I guess. She seemed to be into it. Doctor said 'soul, beauty, structure' sometimes when she was drinking. Math? Beauty? Hello?

I guess the others got what they wanted from me, too. I liked that we could talk about religion and philosophy without getting into the rituals of the five Muslim prayers a day and that stuff. We didn't do so much of that except during holidays.

For two years, Salima and I had been taught only by these four, plus whoever Cooch decided to bring in for extra discussion. Each class was just you and your instructor—just the two of you. There was no place to hide from thinking about problems and answering questions about them, for either Salima or me. Sometimes a tutor would chase me around in my mind, trying to get to an answers I hadn't yet figured out how to give. Or even that I knew. Some of that was fun. Salima really liked the math part with Doctor. She blew off the rest of the Islam and philosophy stuff, always trying to get back to the logic of the situation and appropriate responses. She didn't get any outside tutors after the first few. Cooch said that she sounded like Doctor and scorn was not appropriate for visiting fellows in history or religion. Doctor supported Salima. She usually did.

The classes ran from an hour in Islam and history, to two or three hours in movement or math.

Uncle Jerome was for the weekends to run and shoot in the country. Sometimes Cooch came along. Salima not so often. We had each drifted to what made us most comfortable. Until now, our tutors seemed fine with that drifting.

Cooch's office was a formal setting for us, until now used only once.

Now what? This is a first.

I knew something big was happening. My stomach felt tied in a square knot. Salima slipped her sweating hand into mine.

Tang was behind us, still. As usual.

“Doctor and I are interested in how young people learn, so that we can find ways to use technology to educate poor children across the world. We’ve talked about how you two have helped us.

“You two have been our grand experiment. We worked hard to teach you and you worked hard to learn. Both of you have done well, very well. We were able to teach two youngsters, you, who had no special obvious gifts of the mind and no formal schooling.

“Teaching the two of you gave us a chance to watch what happened closely, to make notes and watch as you caught up to where you would have been in school if you had been in classes with others your age from age six as so many children in the world are, or should be. We’ve spent the better part of two years with you and Salima.

“Now we’re ready to have you join classes with others your age. To learn how to live with others of your age. To show us how you learn in a more traditional environment.

“We have decided to send the two of you off to a school in the United Kingdom, in Scotland,” Cooch said. “Your tutors agree with me on that decision. We have chosen a school and would like the two of you to go there to live and learn, rather than stay here.”

Leave here? Just like that? Scotland?

Salima ran to Doctor, tears running down her face. Doctor smoothed the tears from her face and said, “You’ll like it there, Salima. There will be girls your age and you won’t have to learn math from me anymore. It will be exciting to live and learn with others, from others.”

It was sort of what I expected from Doctor. The right words, but just words. No real feeling behind them. Scotland? It's cold there.

"Have we done wrong, Cooch?" I said. "Is this punishment?"

"This is not punishment," Cooch said. "You may one day even view it as a reward."

I stood quiet. I didn't know what was going on, but it didn't sound like a reward to me. Salima was back at my side, hand in mine.

"Do we have a choice?" I asked.

"When I brought you here, you agreed that you would do my bidding in return for food and shelter. I have provided food and shelter. Doctor and I also provided you with lessons and education that would prepare you for a more productive life. Uncle Jerome has provided lessons on living and Tang has looked after you and taught you movement.

"I expect you to continue to do my bidding. Do you agree to continue to do as I ask?

I thought about the fat Bedouin and sleeping in cold stables and colder abandoned shops. Scotland was likely no worse and we wouldn't be hungry, probably. Besides, we owed Cooch. We had agreed to do as he asked and he had been more than fair about treating Salima and me well.

"We will obey, Cooch," I said. Salima gave my hand a little squeeze.

She had thought it through, like always.

Cooch smiled. It was a smile of agreement, of a plan come true but not one of joy or satisfaction.

“There is one key thing in your new adventure in Scotland that you must keep in mind,” Cooch said. “You’ll be tempted to tell others all about yourselves and maybe brag a little to fit in. I don’t want you to do that. I don’t want you to always win in a contest if it’s not an important one, even if you could win. I want you to learn to live like Westerners, with their customs, speech and habits, but to not show so much of yourselves as you might like.

“Don’t bring attention to yourselves. If you are still, others will fill up the air with stories about themselves. It’s better that you know more about them than they know about you. We want you to have balance in your lives. If you get too much attention, achieving that balance is harder.”

Balance? Balance is something you seek in movement—knees flexed slightly, weight forward, alert. It’s hard when you’re spinning in the air, seeking the horizon. What the heck is life balance?

“We will obey, Cooch,” I said again. He didn’t answer my question about whether we have a choice in the Scotland school thing, so I guess not.

“Fair enough,” Cooch said. “We’ve ordered clothes for you to take, and luggage. Figure out what questions you have and we’ll answer them. Your plane leaves in four days.”

Chapter

Getting from Morocco to Scotland

In the airport, Cooch accompanied us to Immigration, the place that checked our new passports. We had each given a suitcase to a man in uniform outside at the airport curb.

The man opened each passport and looked Salima and me up and down, glancing at us and our passports. Salima had picked out our pictures to use, from four we got. I still needed a haircut. He looked at me a lot. I should have been fatter, I guess. The passport said that I was five feet seven inches tall and weighed one hundred sixty pounds. I am big across the chest and shoulders from my movement exercise. I grew bigger quickly when I started to train with Tang and ate three or four times a day. I use my legs too much for them to get big, but they're not small.

He looked less at Salima. She was five feet tall, and slim. Ninety pounds. Thick, black, straight hair. Normal looking. Well, she can be a little intense but you can't tell that from a passport photo.

He said to me in Arabic, "What is the purpose of your trip?"

"We are to go to school in Scotland," I said. "We will be in classes with others."

The immigration officer looked a little puzzled, but waved us through. I shook hands with Cooch and turned to walk to our gate. Salima gave him a hug, then followed.

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Salima looked through the airport window at our airplane. “Karim,” she said, “there is no way that it is safe to get on something that big and expect it to carry us up in the air.”

Neither of us had ever flown on a plane before, and I silently agreed with her. But Salima is thirteen, a year younger than I am, and she was already nervous about leaving home. I pushed down my fear and gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“It’s an adventure, Salima,” I said. “Let’s just enjoy it.”

She gave me a doubtful look. Salima doesn’t like adventure so much. She likes things orderly, just like Doctor. The whole hand squeeze thing back there was just optimism on her part. Reality strikes. We’ve probably been through a lot worse.

I was pretty scared too. It didn’t seem reasonable that this steel monster was going to go up in the air and fly us for more than a thousand miles, but there we were.

When Salima and me were begging in the streets of Tangier, I was way more scared than now, not knowing where we were going to sleep or whether we’d eat. Salima said she had nightmares about that fat Bedouin slob who pawed her body, then punched and kicked me. I’ve had some bad nights with that, too.

But this airplane and new school stuff was scary, too. I wondered how many different kinds of scared there were.

Before long, we were thumping and bumping down the runway, going ever faster. I could see ocean, the Strait of Gibraltar, from my window.

We sat in seats 29E and F. Salima said it was safer for us to sit behind the wings. She reads that kind of stuff. She pulled a magazine from the seat pocket in front of her, rolled it into a tube, then held it parallel and waved her middle and index fingers down beside it. Her hand was shaking a little.

"These are the plane's wheels she said." She closed her fingers. "They cause wind drag when they are down so they store them up in the belly after takeoff, so the flight is smoother and cheaper. The speed makes a wind that flows faster over the top of the wing than the bottom. That lifts the plane into the air."

"OK, genius," I said. "Now why would the wind do that?"

Salima shrugged. "The wing is shaped in a particular way, sort of like a teardrop with the fat part on the front, called an airfoil. The lift on an airfoil is primarily the result of its angle of attack and shape."

I hate it when she knows this stuff. The shrug is the worst, like *Everyone knows this, but…*

I looked out the window and saw more ocean, then our ride got very smooth.

"That much seemed to work," Salima said. "I'm a little less scared now."

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We sat on that airplane for three hours. After thirty minutes in the air, first the fear then the novelty wore off. Then it was a long, noisy bus. Salma was asleep beside me. I liked her there.

I put my earphones on, thumbed my smart phone and went back to my study of English. I thought I knew how to speak English. I'd been speaking it every day for more than two years. But, no…

I found out that I spoke American. Three of my teachers were American. The fourth was a Chinaman who didn't talk much.

English was different. The people of the United Kingdom, those from England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, spoke *true* English, they claimed in the lessons I found on the internet. They didn't speak the bastardy version called "American English." At least the grammar was mostly the same.

Now they tell me.

I was learning new nouns, new slang, in their *true* English. They used different words for noun things, like gasoline. They called it petrol. Diesel was gasoil.

They called the hood of a car the bonnet. They called soccer football, but so did everyone one in the world except the Americans. I call it all weird. Why? One version isn't enough?

I'd been studying *true* English slang and humor. They are different, too.

I really want to fit in at our new school. Salima says she doesn't care about that so much. I don't believe her, but OK.

I found some Scottish comedians on the Internet, doing shows. It's comedy with a lot of slang, mostly dirty. I downloaded some to my smart phone before we left. Those Scots' language is as foul as American comedians, for sure. Maybe worse, because I'm not sure what some of the words mean, or the meaning of some of the jokes. It's still pretty funny.

Maybe that made me a wanker. In American slang a wanker is a jerk-off, but who knew? I didn't have any friends to tell me, just the oceans of information on the internet. All sorts of meanings slopped one on the other. Well, maybe not slopped.

Blimey, mate, is this a messy midnight event or are you calling me a low-life?

If Salima had nightmares about the streets, I had them now about standing up in front of my new "mates", my "friends" in American English, and sounding like a Muslim Yank who doesn't speak English so good. I was working on it.

I made up a sentence to practice my new, *true* slang. I was going to say it to someone who was mean to me or Salima.

"Blimey, what fooking kind of wanker are you, dripping slimy shite like that out of your bloody gob. You some kind of pooftah? Arsehole!"

But saying that might get me in trouble and lead to a fight. Cooch said I mustn't fight, so maybe not.

Chapter

London’s Heathrow Airport

Cooch had written directions for us to get from the place in the airport where we followed the signs to Baggage Claim and picked up our small suitcases at the rotating luggage belt. We showed our new Moroccan passports to a man in a uniform with his head wrapped in a maroon turban, then began our walk to the subway they called the Underground, to get to London. London’s Heathrow airport was not in London, but pretty far outside it. Once we changed some Moroccan money to English money, we followed signs with a red circle around a blue bar across its middle that said ‘Underground’, to the subway station. We bought tickets, then got on the little train with our luggage on the floor in front of us. Salima studied the map of Underground stops on the wall across the car from us. I think she wanted to be sure we didn’t miss our stop, even though Cooch’s directions said the final stop was the right one.

In thirty minutes or so, we got to a big train station in London named Waterloo, with many different sets of railroad tracks and different trains and voices blaring instructions in English from big speakers. We found a ticket seller’s window, and bought tickets to a town in Scotland that was written on our instructions. Cooch’s directions were written in both Arabic and English. Our English is not so good yet.

A big electronic board on the ceiling told us which set of numbered tracks we should use to find our train. Our tracks were not yet listed, but we had one hour, thirty four minutes before our train was to leave the station, so we went to get food at a second floor restaurant nearby called Pret a Manger. It was upstairs and had good sandwiches even though it had a dumb name that was not in the English dictionary on my Kphone. When we came back down after thirty minutes, the big electronic board said we were to go to track eight.

We were early when we got there, so we stood near some small steel barriers that prevented us from getting to our train, watching how others got through. People put their tickets in a little slot on the front of that barriers then the ticket popped up from a slot on its top and the barriers opened and we could take the ticket back.

We did that and got on the train right away. It took more than five hours on the train to get to our town. We stopped often for some people to get on and for others to get off. England and Scotland are very green with lots of cows and sheep.

The railroad people brought food to us that tasted like cardboard, stale sliced meat and limp lettuce between dry slices of doughy white bread, but we were hungry and both of us eat whenever food is available. The tea was pretty good for not being mint tea like we have in Morocco. They had milk that was good as our goats' milk. Salima was watching a video on her Kphone about how trains worked. At least she wasn't crying, but she didn't very often.

When our train reached Edinburgh, I checked Cooch's directions and keyed a number on my Kphone.

"Aye?" a man answered with a strange English accent.

"Hello?" I said.

"Aye?"

"We are to be students at a school named Bairdston," I said, louder. "We are on a train that is to arrive near there in one hour, thirty minutes. Am I talking to the right person?"

"Aye," he said.

"Did you understand me?" I asked, even louder.

"Aye," he said, "but your English is terrible. I'm not deaf."

I watched Salima looking over the train station and pounding her Kphone with her thumbs each time I asked the same question, making sure that I had my English right. Her eyes got bigger every time I raised my voice.

“Will someone pick us up at the train station?” I said a little more quietly.

“Oh, aye,” he said. “That’s me job. I’ll pick you up when you arrive.’ He hung up the phone.

Salima seemed very happy when I told her we weren’t lost. I felt better too.

Chapter

When the train finally stopped at our destination, Dundiee, we stepped off the train with our small suitcases in hand. We were met by an old man dressed in a black suit with a vest, a white shirt and a tiny polka dotted bowtie. He was short and fat with tufts of grey hair growing out of his nose and ears beneath his stiff-brimmed black hat.

“I am Mr. Ainsley,” he said, then picked up our suitcases and showed us to a huge black car idling nearby, dark smoke puffing from its exhaust. We crawled into the back seat while he put our bags in behind us in a part of the car that he called the ‘boot’.

It was a Saturday when most people don’t work, but Mr. Ainsley told me that they were waiting for us, whoever ‘they’ were. When we stopped, there was a big gate flanked by tall steel spikes and stone pillars. One of them had a concrete plaque with shined brass letters that said, “The Bairdston School, founded 1748.”

We drove through the gate when it opened and up a small hill. At its top, I looked down at a wide valley dominated by four large buildings that looked like old mansions.

Each of them was square, but the front of each dominated the look, with all its pretty windows and the shrubs and big lawn out front. That front section had a long slate roof, with three little pointy things with windows, dormers maybe, sticking out from the front. Windows there might mean that someone lived there. It looked very small in the space that stuck out, but was maybe bigger under the roof. The two floors below the roof looked old and nice, grey stone with windows and all. The other three sides to each square were two stories with a low roof. The windows there looked pretty standard. Whatever was in the middle didn’t have light.

Behind the four buildings I could see practice fields and tennis courts. There were quite a few smaller buildings, still big, but flat and not nearly as pretty.

“Are those our dormitories?” I asked Mr. Ainsley, pointing..

He glanced back at me. “Aye,” he said, the turned back to his driving.

I wanted to know something about Bairdston and he said, ”Aye?” Just Aye?

We already had Tang. I don’t need another near mute.

We drove down the hill to a modest dark stone building with small windows and a big wooden door. When we got out, a tall, thin man opened the door. He had a tiny ring of short grey hair just above his ears, and was wearing an old grey sweater with a striped necktie underneath.

“Mr. and Miss Kufdani “I presume,” he said. “I am Duncan Carlton, the headmaster here at the Bairdston School. You may call me Mr. Carlton or Headmaster. Come in, come in. Welcome to your new home. You bags will be taken to your rooms.” We followed him into the building. The walls were covered with old photos and prints. The vaulted ceiling was reinforced with curved wood beams. Salima gripped my hand and walked close to me. Headmaster opened another door and waved us into a room. It was an office with an old wooden desk piled with papers and a cracked leather chair behind. There was a small, glass topped wooden table covered in a dark plaid tablecloth with four chairs around it, set with a teapot and three cups on white saucers. A plate of cheese and crackers was in the middle. He pointed us to two of the chairs and sat in a third.

“I am delighted the two of you are here,” he said. “I hope you like Bairdston. We will make every effort to make you feel welcome.”

“Thank you, Mr. Headmaster,” I said. Salima was silent.

“Your admission was unusual,” Mr. Headmaster said. “You both have less formal education than most students we admit. But your parents have more influence than we usually encounter, so here you are.”

“We have no parents,” I said. “Cooch is our guardian. He told us to come here.”

“I see,” Mr. Carlton said. “I’m sorry for your loss. We have not had Moroccan students recently, but we value you for your diversity.”

“I don’t know this English word ‘diversity’, I said, and looked at Salima. She shook her head, still quiet.

“I just mean that you come from a different background than many of our students, from a different part of the world with different customs. We hope that your differences will help our students better understand the world and that you will better understand our world as a result of being here.”

“Now,” he said, pulling a notepad in front of him and picking up a pen, “Let’s find a little about what you know and what Bairdston can best do to prepare you for life.”

“What subjects in your schooling did you enjoy most?

“Movement is my favorite,” I said. “I like English and Spanish. History is fun when I read it. Religion is great fun. Math I don’t like so much.”

Headmaster turned to look at Salima. “And you, young lady? Why are you here?”

Salima was silent for a few moments, then looked up and said, “I was told to come.”

“I see,” Carlton said. “Did you object?”

“No,” Salima said.

“Why not, may I ask?” he said.

“Cooch feeds and protects us,” Salima said. “He gives us a safe place to sleep. We have agreed to do his bidding and be obedient.”

The Headmaster looked at me. I nodded.

Mr. Carlton shifted in his chair. He seemed uncomfortable with our answers but not sure how to proceed to learn more.

“And your favorite subjects to study, Miss Kufdani?”

“I don’t like movement too much. I like math but I am not very good at it. I want to please Doctor and she is impatient with my learning.”

“I see,” Carlton said, even though he still didn’t seem to understand. “We at Bairdston are proud of our math teaching. We have a number of talented teachers in math. Is it arithmetic that troubles you?”

“Doctor says it is all arithmetic until you get to math.”

Mr. Carlton gazed at her for several seconds. He seemed unsure whether Salima was slow or had language difficulties. He glanced at the stack of papers to his right. The top page looked like the entrance form we had both filled out.

“Salima,” he said, “What troubles you right now in arithmetic?”

“Statistics, I suppose,” Salima said. “I have trouble with the pictures there. Algebra was easier. Doctor is impatient. She says statistics is about learning to live properly and math is about learning how to think properly. I want to please Doctor. When I swim the pictures don’t come so good now. I like swimming with Doctor and I like living with Karim at Cooch’s home. “

“I see,” he said uncertainly. “We may have a few tests for you to take that will help us place you better in math. We’ll see.”

“And Mr. Kufdani,” Carlton said as he again turned to me. “Do you know Doctor? Does he teach you math as well and do you swim together?”

“Doctor teaches us both, but she likes Salima better and they swim together. I’m not so good at math and swimming. I think better in movement learning.”

“As I do for every entering foreign student,” Carlton said, “I want to explain our infamous system of naming school years for students aged twelve through sixteen as ‘forms.’

“In a Scottish public school such as Bairdston, at age thirteen you are usually in the second form. Miss Kufdani, you will thus be in the second form. Mr. Kufdani, you will be in the third form with the other fourteen year olds. Forms increase by one for every year you are here, so at the end of your fifth form you will have finished here. There is also a sixth form, for the brightest and most driven students, to prepare for the difficult task of being accepted to a top university such as our Edinburgh University, plus Cambridge or Oxford in England. To complicate things, we move students from form to form as their particular skills indicate.”

“So, Mr. Carlton,” I said, “If I am, like, rilly good at history, I may be assigned to a higher level class and learn more there?” Americans say like and rilly like that, really. Maybe true speakers do, too.

Carlton smiled. “Precisely. You can be moved down a form as well as up. There is no glory in going up a form, nor is there a form of punishment involved in moving down a form. We want to educate our students as well as we possibly can and place them in a particular form to that end.”

Salima started to fidget in the chair beside me. I was silent.

Carlton stood and brushed cracker crumbs from his sweater, then said. “Shall we move on?”

“I have made room assignments for both of you. I shall have Mrs. Seemly show Miss Kufdani to the girls’ dormitory. Mr. Kufdani, you will come with me, please.”

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Headmaster Carlton and I stood in a room with four beds, placed two and two, one beside the other on two walls. There were four wooden desks with padded chairs and lamps on them. Mr. Carlton opened a large closet, divided into four sections. In two of the sections hung three white shirts, a single blue blazer with a crest on the pocket, wool tweed trousers, and black, thick soled, leather lace-up shoes. One blazer looked big enough to be a tent—the other was small. I had never worn leather shoes like these. One set of shoes was very large and the other small. They were big, ugly and looked heavy. Each locker also had two pairs of running shoes on the floor of the closet. The running shoes were very nice. There were drawers for socks and underwear.

"You have two roommates, Mr. Kufdani," Headmaster said. "One is Nigerian and the other is an Arab like you, but from the United Arab Emirates. They are also first-year students. There are many other boys on this dormitory level whom you will meet soon. Our evening meal is nearly over, but we will make sure that you and Salima are fed. You will both be fitted for proper clothing and footwear on Monday morning. Classes begin on Wednesday."

He turned and left the room. I sat on the chair at one of the desks and thought about this cold, strange place. Cooch had told both Salima and me that we needed to learn how to live with Westerners and think like them and that this school was right for us to do that. We were off to a bad start.

A warmer place would have been nicer. I didn't want to come here. If I had known it was this cold I would maybe have argued, but probably not. Cooch didn't ask whether I wanted to come. Doctor didn't ask Salima about that either.

It was hard and scary until Cooch found us. Like Salima said, we both told Cooch that we would do his bidding in return for him providing us food and shelter. Why wouldn't we? But Scotland?

I heard the thump of feet on the stairs, then two boys walked into the room. One was so black that his skin was shiny and so big that he almost had to duck his head coming through the doorway. Behind him was a small, pudgy boy with honey-colored skin and dark hair.

“I‘m Namadi,” the big boy said in a decent English accent. “I am Nigerian and pleased to make your acquaintance. Are you our new roommate?”

I nodded. “I’m Karim. I‘m Moroccan. Yes, I’m your new roommate.”

The pudgy boy said in Arabic, “I am Sayed. I am a prince from the United Arab Emirates, but you may call me Sayed.”

“I’m glad to meet someone who speaks a civilized language, Sayed,” I said in Arabic. In English I said, “But we’re supposed to speak English here.”

Sayed nodded unhappily.

Chapter

Salima

Karim walked out the door with headmaster. Now I was really alone. A large, older woman with glasses and a blue wool sweater walked in and smiled at me. She stuck out her hand and shook mine formally. Muslim women don't shake hands so much, but she was probably a Christian. Karim told me Scotland had a lot of those. I don't think much about that religion stuff. It's messy and hard to put in order.

"I am Mrs. Seemly," she said. "Follow me, please, Miss Kufdani."

I followed the wide behind of Mrs. Seemly across a large, grassy open area to a building like the one I had just seen Karim walk into. When that door closed behind him, my stomach clutched. I'm not sure why. We walked up a set of stairs to the second floor, where Mrs. Seemly stopped to catch her breath. There was a long hall with doors on both sides. There were a few girls standing in the corridor and many doors stood open. The sound of western music, the sort of twangy kind, was loud.

"Walk this way, Ms. Kufdani," Mrs. Seemly said, and started down the corridor. I stared at the big, padded hips waddling in front of me.

I don't think I can walk that way, I thought, then hurried to catch up. Doctor got angry when I mocked people, but she often laughed at the same time. This was probably not the right time for mocking by waddling.

Mrs. Seemly opened the second door on the left side of the hall and walked into the room. Music filled the room, some sort of techno beat. There were four narrow beds, but two of the girls in the room sat together on one of them. That seemed strange to me, but I had never been around girls my age so maybe not. The third girl was on another bed, knees up, leaning against the wall and reading a book propped against her upper legs. A big speaker sat on the desk corner next to them; there were no wires in sight so it was likely Bluetooth. They looked older, maybe fifteen or sixteen. They stared at me.

“Ladies,” Mrs. Seemly said, “this is Salima Kufdani. She will be rooming with you. She is joining us from Morocco, in North Africa.”

The girl with the book on her legs was a pretty, trim girl with black, curly hair, probably a year older than the other two. She set her book down, walked to me and held out her hand. “Welcome, Salima. I’m Annabelle Ritchie. We’re going to be great friends.”

Camilla and Susan, the other two girls in the room, looked me up and down, snickered, and waved from the bed. My Moroccan clothes didn’t help my confidence. I had the darkest skin in the room.

“Hello,” they said casually, then resumed talking to each other.

Mrs. Seemly glared at them, then walked to a large closet separated into four sections. There were clothes in all four and a pile on the floor. She took the clothes from the least-filled section and dropped them to the floor.

“This will be your closet, Salima,” Mrs. Seemly said. “On Monday you’ll be fitted for skirts and blazers like these and shoes.” She pointed to the blue and brown, plaid, pleated skirts, white blouse, blue blazers with a crest embroidered on the left pocket and sensible, black leather shoes. There were running shoes on the bottom of three sections.

“Your luggage should be here soon,” she said. “You may use these drawers.” She opened three drawers to ensure that they were usable. They were empty.

“Well now, I’ll let you ladies to it,” Seemly said. “I expect you to be civil to your new roommate.”

She turned and walked from the room. I was terrified. I stood with the beginnings of tears in my eyes and tried to decide what to do. Doctor had told me to be decisive.

I smiled at Camilla and Susan and walked over to them. “I am Salima,” I said, and held my hand. Camilla held out a limp hand, gave a brief shake, and dropped her hand.

Susan said, “Hello, Saliva,” and giggled. She didn’t offer to shake my hand.

“It’s Salima. My name is Salima.”

“Not anymore,” Susan said. “You’re Saliva now. We don’t give a spit about you, woggie girl.” Camilla giggled.

“Enough of that, Susan,” Annabelle said. “If you start on her, I’m going to start on you.”

Susan dropped her eyes. “Just having a little fun with the newbie, Ritchie.”

“She’s going to be living with us, Susan. Exercise your sick humor on someone else.”

I looked at Susan, then at Annabelle. *I don’t think I’m going to like it here,* I thought.

Chapter

Back in his office, Duncan Carlton put the kettle back on the hot plate. He took off his blazer and hung it on a wooden hanger behind the door, then sat behind his desk and leaned back in his chair, looking blankly at the timbered ceiling.

What shall I do with little Salima Kufdani? She said that algebra was easy and statistics hard. Does she know anything about either? I said that we might be asking her to take some tests, but what tests?

There had been short exams involved with each prospective student gaining entrance to Bairdston. Both Kufdani children did well, but getting Salima's math form placement properly done was challenging, if only because of his lack of specific information about her skills.

As Headmaster, Carlton had access to many different tests for young adults. The most comprehensive set of tests in the United Kingdom were the A-levels, given to students for evaluating their qualifications for entrance to university. The A-level results largely defined the success or failure of Bairdston and its public school peers at educating children to successfully do university level work.

The tests came in blocks of difficulty in each topic and ranged from hard to very hard. A-levels attempted to document how much academically useful information and skills a particular student had gained up until age seventeen or eighteen. Past tests and sample tests were available in abundance, particularly in math.

Well, then, I shall bound the problem on the upper side. If Salima fails miserably on the basic A-levels in math, I'll know a lot more and proper placement will follow. Tomorrow, then. Mrs. Seemly can monitor the test-taking.

Chapter

Ten thousand little needles were stabbing my back through my wet t-shirt and stinging my head as if they would rip my hair out. Icy water rolled from my hair down my face, mixing with old, cold sweat. My hands were so cold that my knuckles ached and the goose bumps on my body felt as big as olives. Yips of pain and muffled curses from my school mates sounded all around me. A cold rain had turned to sleet a few minutes ago and then to spiked pellets of hail. I had never seen or felt hail before. It hurt.

I stood shivering with some of my school mates on the northwest coast of Scotland, facing the Atlantic Ocean. Why did people live in this frigid, desolate country?

My slower mates were struggling to run through the shallow surf, trying to catch up to us and the first instructor. The second instructor was yelling at the laggards. "Come on, lads," he yelled, "Are you girlie boys? Buck up. Don't let your mates down. They're standing in the cold because you're not keeping up."

Finally, the last of the boys came from the surf and joined us. There were shallow lines in the rocky sand behind them, dug by the tips of sodden running shoes and dragged by boys too tired to lift their feet. Some of the boys leaned over with pain, trying to catch their breath. One vomited on the rocky ground. The first and second instructors bullied us into a formation with their shouts. We turned to run together the last half mile back to Bairdston. The second instructor sang some stupid song in some form of the English language I didn't understand, but the song gave us a rhythm that helped running and breathing together. We had been told that the morning run was to build our character. It wasn't hard, it was just cold. Dumb.

All this character building stuff was probably ordered by Headmaster Carlton. He was there every morning, standing to the side of our group, clapping his hands like there was music playing. The floppy brim of his green waxed cotton hat flapped in the wind, while a steady stream of water ran from its back and down his neck. Hail danced from the hat like water poured into a hot skillet. A green polo shirt that might have been a hundred years old with a Bairdston logo faded on the

left chest. Ugly blue shorts. And the shoes, oh the shoes. Brand new, with a bright orange streak running around the side of the rubber soles and bright pink shoelaces, soaked.

At least he ran with us and kept his gob shut. Our instructors did all the yelling, but after three weeks at Bairdston, I expected that.

As we crested a small hill, the cold gray stone of the Bairdston School splayed below us in eight or ten buildings beside grassy fields turned soggy, usually used for football and rugby. There were a few tennis courts standing with limp, soggy nets over cracked blacktop, set aside for Bairdston's girls. The five grass practice fields behind were used by boys and girls alike, for football, field hockey, rugby and the like.

We ran for the leftmost of the buildings below us—our dormitory is on its second floor and classrooms are on its first.

In our boy's dormitory bathing hall, we stripped off our cold socks, shorts, and shirts and dropped them into a big hamper, a canvas sack that was as wide as I am tall. Our names were printed in all our clothes, so that we got them back. We opened our shoes and dumped the water from them, then ran naked for the steam that marked the entrance to our hot showers.

In a few moments, boys began to come from the showers, laughing and pushing to grab one of the heavy cotton towels stacked in tall, open wooden cabinets.

A couple of weeks ago, I stood watching a mob of yelling, naked boys the first time we showered after a run. I was waiting to grab a towel. We didn't have group showers in Morocco where I grew up.

Zap! Someone stuck a burning match onto my bare arse.

"Ow!" I yelled as I spun, looking for the guy behind me holding a smoldering match. No one, no match, no one to kick. A few of the older boys were grinning and holding their damp towels by two ends, spinning them to roll them tight.

Before long, more towels were reaching and snapping for bare buttocks.

The next time one came for me, I was ready. I grabbed the towel as it unraveled, then jerked it out of the other boy's hand. Sometimes a boy fell on the wet floor when I jerked the towel away from him. I could sense when someone was going to snap behind me, so I often grabbed the towel and jerked it without looking. The other boys seemed to think that was a very cool trick. It took me a long time back home to learn to sense moving things. The sense of a damp towel moving behind me was about the same as someone swinging a club. What to do about the sense was a matter of movement.

I didn't get snapped so much these days.

We wrapped towels around our bodies, picked up our wet shoes, and ran for our rooms to dress for breakfast and class. My English was maybe not as good as the other Arab, Sayed, but better than Namadi, the Nigerian.

The yelling and towel snapping in the shower, the endless noise in the dorm, sleeping in the same room with two others and the incessant loud western music were annoying.

When I complained to Namadi, he said, "Try listening to lions snort and roar out in the jungle. I'm out there, trying to sleep in a string hammock wrapped up around me like a lion sausage. That's scary."

I wasn't sure whether he was having me on with the lion stuff, but the lion sausage was a good image.

After two weeks as roommates, the three of us were becoming friends. I hadn't had a friend my age for over two years, when I saw the last of Hasad out of the window of the Range Rover that took Salima and me from the café. I don't remember much before that.

Chapter

Karim

After breakfast, Namadi and Sayed headed off to their classes and I headed to World History, trying to loosen the necktie at my throat. Even the girls wore them here. Sayed had told me I'd get used to them, but I was doubtful.

History was taught by Mr. Malley, a young man and new to Bairdston, the others boys said. His accent was Irish rather than Scottish, but his English was still hard for me to understand. The Irish probably had their own slang, their own true English. Mr. Malley wore an old suit that had a jacket nearly worn through at the elbows. It was shinier than the trousers, making it look like it had been washed more often. The jacket was too big for him and hung on his shoulders like a tattered cape. An old belt pulled his pants together at the waist, with many stretched, now unused belt holes sticking from the ragged leather end. The buckle's holding spike showed like a shiny tongue from the tarnished buckle. His leaky blue eyes made a shimmering bulge behind thick eye-glasses; tiny red veins journeyed along the white part. The other boys called him 'Peepers'. Nicknames are big at Bairdston. I don't have a nickname yet.

Peepers told stories of times and places that made it seem that I was living in whatever time or place he was teaching that day. I liked the class because learning seemed easier when I was living something rather than just reading about it, especially in English, since I still translate English to Arabic sometimes. He told us that our assignments were created so we could stay in the time and place where he put us during class and learn more about our new lives in the past from our reading assignments.

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After world history was sport. Someone at Bairdston, the headmaster maybe, had decided that we should learn a different sport every week. I'm not sure why. First, we had running, which Bairdston said was called 'track.' I was good at track, I think because Uncle Jerome taught me to run fast and jump high. I didn't win much praise for being first, since Cooch told me not to win because that would bring attention to me, but second was OK. I was usually second. Cooch didn't tell me why I shouldn't win, but I didn't ask.

Balance, maybe, but what's that all about? I think he should have told us more about life balance, so we could maybe practice it.

Cooch fed and housed us for free like he said, but didn't talk much to us except when he was teaching religion.

On the second night after track class started, Namadi and Sayed talked about how to do track.

"I think I could do better at track if I knew what was important to do with my body," Namadi said. "Karim, you have very good control of your body in track. It looks as if you aren't even trying to run fast."

"You're big, Namadi," Sayed said. "You don't need to run fast. Big is enough. I can't run fast, I'm small and I run out of breath when I run very far."

"Big is enough until everyone else is as big or bigger," Namadi said. "I don't know if I'll quit growing before everyone else does. How do I learn to run fast, so I can be good at something without being the biggest guy around?"

I stood up and pointed at my hips, with my butt pushed back. "When your hips aren't above your hips when you run, you lose a bunch of power and can't run as fast as you should. Your body has to translate your power inefficiently."

I pulled my hips under my body and pointed again. “You must have your hips forward and over your legs, so that when you drive power down, everything lines up from hips to feet with no loss of power. It’s all about power efficiency. Think hips forward. It’s not that hard.”

I didn’t tell him how long it took me to master that, but it should get to be fun for him soon. I didn’t tell him that he ran like a white guy, either.

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Another week we had rugby, where we ran up and down a field on two different teams, trying to get an oblong leather ball to the opposite end while boys on the other team tried to take it from you or throw you to the ground before you try to throw the ball to other teammates who aren’t being chased. I’m not so good at rugby because I never learned to throw well and the ball often missed the boy I was throwing it to. I’m not even second best at rugby.

Namadi was good at rugby because he was so big that it took two or three boys to tackle him. I worked with him on running with his hips forward and driving his leg power straight down from them. Until I learned that, Uncle Jerome told me that I ran like a white guy. Namadi doesn’t run so much like a white guy anymore. He’s a fast learner.

I got banged around a little in rugby. Andrew Ahearn was captain of the Bairdston rugby team and liked to come to the practices when we were learning to play the game. I suppose he was helping look for promising new team members. Ahearn seemed to take great pleasure in banging me to the ground when we were in a scrum, fighting for the ball. I heard him call it, “whack the woggie.”

If we got to play football, Namadi was going to do a lot better if he was fast. He was so big that he was scary when he was running at you. Fast made it worse. Football might be a lot of fun with him playing.