

PROLOGUE

Lahore, Pakistan 1970

This is the type of story that should begin with once upon a time. Once upon a time, she breezed into the city like an icy frost on a hot summer's day. She came and went ruthlessly, like a chill that sets deep inside your lungs and leaves you gasping for air. It was August, and the city of Lahore was sweltering with a heat it had not felt in over fifty years. Society had long fallen asleep beneath the suffocating climate and did not so much as raise a curious glance towards the new stranger. In fact, it was only in the evenings, after sunset, when the severity of the sun's fervor had calmed and a mild breeze passed through stale windows, sleepy courtyards and empty bazaars with the promise of redemption, that people slowly made their way out on to the street, and the city finally breathed its first strangled breath. This was the state of the city when she made her appearance.

It would not be correct to say she was a young woman. Some women are never young. It is written in their destiny, though they may not know it at the time. Certainly, it was the last thing on her mind as she crept across this abandoned part of town. Lost and forgotten were its inhabitants. The town's neglect had made them restless. She could feel them stirring. It wasn't a cold night, yet she began to shiver and then laugh at her own anxiety. With all her power, she willed her body from shaking, her teeth from chattering, her blood from running cold, and walked deeper into the cemetery. The voices urged her forward. When she felt something cold grab her ankle, she stopped. Buried between dust and weeds and rubble, it was barely visible, but there was no denying it; this was the grave that had called out to her. She could hear its whispers; she could feel its anger. It was hungry. She took out a small pouch which contained the tiny heart of a new born chick, so fresh it was still warm, a sprig of cinnamon, the dried petals of a rose, all wrapped together with lock of freshly cut human hair. Hair so soft, so rich...and still exhibiting traces of its fragrant shampoo. Redemption at last, thought Humara and she let out a blood-curdling screech, a laugh that would echo for years to come.



Perhaps, Naseer Ashruf had heard this echo too, this laughter from the not too distant future whispering in the wind, the laughter of two diverging destinies beckoning him, as he seemed reluctant to leave his residence. He had not intended to go out, but the severity of the day had given way to the softness of the nightfall, and it was under the cover of night that his restlessness gave way and his yearning became too great to bear.

He could feel the weight of the lighter in his pocket...*his fingers began to twitch*. He envisioned the smooth cigarette between his fingers, the excitement of the flame, the anticipation of the first inhale... and then redemption. A good smoke could cure so many ills. It was this and a strong cup of tea that he needed tonight.

Naseer had been worried about the future of his family's business for many months now, but it was not the future he should have been worried about. The future he should have been worried about lay waiting for him like a ripe piece of fruit: its nectar intoxicating; its fragrance kissing the wind.

Standing outside in the open road, Naseer could feel the perspiration trickle down, under his collar and his shirt, yet he had no desire to go inside. He was enjoying the calm of the city in the quiet darkness – *taking deep drags from his cigarette, watching the traffic go by.*

He had arrived at the teahouse early and having a few minutes to spare, he was mulling over the question of his family's estate, its livelihood. It was a question that had plagued him for some time, when he was distracted by a woman's laughter.

It was a voice that beckoned and mocked at the same time. Naseer looked up to see a woman getting out of a rickshaw, laughing carelessly with her girlfriend. To look at, she was a comely girl with smooth skin and hair the color of midnight, but there was something about her gaze that drew him in and held him there. As she passed by, she noticed his stare and bestowed an amused smile upon him. He took a deep breath and smiled—*Jasmine.*

Long after the two women entered the tea house, her scent lingered, distracting him from his thoughts with whispers of untold promises.

Naseer checked his watch and decided to wait for his friend inside. He chose a corner table, keeping the door within his line of vision. He could see that the two women had ordered a drink and were chatting about the color and style of fabric they had left with a local tailor. It was a good twenty minutes later that he heard the ringing of chimes and Ahmed Nawaz walked through the door.

"*Yaar*, you finally made it," said Naseer. "I've been waiting here for an hour."

"Sorry, I was delayed, *yaar*, some family friends dropped by at the last minute and I could not leave," said Ahmed.

"The uncle was an old friend of my father's, and he was practically grilling me like an army sergeant. I suppose he is trying to figure out if I am good enough to marry his niece or daughter or whoever it is he's looking for."

"So what's happening with you? Are you still planning on staying in the city?"

"No, *yaar*. I was planning on checking out the Middle East—the market is booming there—or perhaps Singapore or Indonesia. I haven't decided yet. There is a lot of money in the desert, but I don't think I want to go through the hassle that foreigners, *especially us Pakistanis*, have to face."

"Hmm . . . hmmm." Ahmed nodded. "Well, I'm glad you're open, *yaar*, because there's an opportunity I wanted to talk to you about."

Naseer glanced over at the two women. There were more people in the café now, and he no longer had a clear view. Amidst the chatter of the restaurant, he felt he could still hear the lilt of her voice. If he listened hard enough, he could see the flutter of her hands that moved in unison with her words.

"So what do you think, *yaar*?" said Ahmed, interrupting his thoughts. Naseer realized that he hadn't heard a word Ahmed had said.

“Something distracting you, *yaar*?” said Ahmed with a hint of a smile. “Anyone I know?”

“No . . . no. Nothing like that, *yaar*. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Maybe we should talk again,” said Ahmed, getting up to leave.

Naseer checked his watch. It had been over an hour.

“Did you bring your car? I’m parked just outside.”

“No, *yaar*. Can you give me a ride?”

Naseer took one final glance back before the two walked outside. Immediately, they were accosted by the noise and the pollution. They heard a loud thud as a bus backfired. Naseer looked around in the dark, trying to spot his car, when a breeze carried the scent of a woman’s perfume. He breathed it in and smiled, recognizing the fragrance. He could see that the two women had come out of the tea house and were looking around for transportation. From their gestures and snippets of their conversation, he gathered that the rickshaw driver had taken off, leaving them stranded and a little frantic. He politely approached the women.

“Is there a problem, miss? Do you need a rickshaw?” asked Naseer, stepping into their line of vision. The two women all of a sudden became very shy, having been approached by a strange man they did not know. It was the mysterious woman with dark hair that finally spoke up, her eyes dark puddles, looking up at Naseer with earnest.

“Sir, we don’t know where our rickshaw driver is. He was supposed to be waiting out here for us. It seems he must have taken off, despite our instructions. We thought maybe we would walk.”

“Two women should not walk unescorted at night. Let me call a rickshaw for you. My friend will wait with you until I come back,” said Naseer, motioning toward Ahmed.

Naseer walked down to the street and hailed a rickshaw within a couple of minutes. As he escorted the two women into the rickshaw, he ventured to ask them about their families and what college they were attending. It was a small town with few women’s colleges, and it would be enough information to track her down later.



An inquiry with the local women’s college was all it took to determine that the full name of the young lady was Humara Khan. She was an orphan who was staying with an uncle who was teaching there. Other than this, very little was known about the girl—or her family. The uncle was quite elderly, remote, and generally kept to himself. *Naseer had to see her again.*

Naseer arranged several visits with a relative who was a chancellor at the college, serendipitously bumping into either Humara or her uncle, Murtaza Khan, while he was on the campus grounds. Eventually, Naseer ran into them so many times that the old uncle had no choice but to invite Naseer over for tea, lest he seem rude. Every

time Naseer would visit the Khan household, the few fleeting encounters he had with Humara would leave him craving more. She had what could only be described as a shy coquettishness that Naseer found intensely alluring. It was the way she looked at him through the corner of her eye or the way she passed by him so closely when serving tea. He could almost breathe in the scent of her body and feel a tremor pass through him. Soon his visits to the Khans' household were so frequent, that they became difficult to ignore.

Naseer's mother was the first to become concerned, but her husband barely looked up from his morning paper as she relayed the gossip she had heard.

"So, he visits Professor Khan two or three times a week. The man's an economist. Naseer is probably getting his opinion on business conditions in the Middle East or the Orient, and if someone catches his eye, there is no harm in it. It may even make our job easier."

But Suriya was not convinced that it was as simple as her husband's explanation. She hoped that someone inappropriate had not caught her son's eye, as she had other plans for her him. There were many beautiful girls from prominent families in society—one in particular had caught her eye.

Masooma Ali was the daughter of a diplomat with strong family connections in government. She was a beautiful girl of marriageable age who had caught the attention of many in their social circle. In Suriya's opinion, she had exactly the type of upbringing and disposition that would make her the ideal wife and daughter-in-law, *and* her father's connections would go a long way to secure their business interests in the city. The last thing Suriya wanted was to see her cherished son leave the country of his birth, and she ached to keep him near her for as long as possible. It had not taken much effort for her to secure an invitation for, tea at Mrs. Ali's house that evening.



For the first time in many days, the setting sun brought a cool breeze with it. It was this airy wind that had convinced Tiara Ali that they should have tea in the garden that evening, where they could enjoy the outdoors and take in the gentle fragrance of fresh flowers. She was right. Mrs. Ali could not have hoped for a more pleasant tea with Suriya Ashruf, who now sat directly across from her, sipping a second cup and nibbling on some homemade sweets. Masooma sat in between the two women, dressed in a pale pink *salwar kameez*. Her long chestnut hair fell loosely down to her waist, looking very much like the Madonna her name implied. Mrs. Ali had been courting Suriya Ashruf for some time now, and this was the second time that Mrs. Ashruf had been to their house for a visit, but not much had been said about a union between the two families. Perhaps Mrs. Ashruf was still weighing her options, thought Tiara. She hoped this silence would not last much longer, or she would be forced to consider other families. Mrs. Ali wished to have her daughter

married and settled within the next six months.

It was not until much later in the evening, when Masooma had left the room to meet some college friends, that Mrs. Ashruf spoke about how much she liked the girl.

“Of course you have a lovely daughter,” said Mrs. Ashruf, “but I can’t make any decision until I’ve talked to my son. He’s quite independent.”

This statement made Mrs. Ali a little nervous, as she had heard the rumors that had been circulating. Mrs. Ashruf must have noticed her concern, for she quickly responded.

“Of course he’s a boy that listens to his mother, too.”

So it was agreed that the next time Mrs. Ashruf would come to visit, she would bring her son.

The sighting of the new moon indicated the arrival of Eid-al-Adha or the Eid of the goat—one of the country’s biggest celebrations. The coming of Eid brought a momentum with it that temporarily lifted the city out of its slumber and, for a while, the people had a reason to be joyous. Naseer was especially looking forward to Eid so that he could speak seriously to his parents. He planned to approach them about sending a marriage proposal to Humara Khan. She was the girl for him and he was tired of thinking up excuses to see her. He could not stop thinking about her. For this reason, he felt a little irritated that his mother had dragged him over to the Khans’ house so soon after Eid prayers. There were many others that he wanted to meet, and he had no interest in any other girl.

Naseer sat with his mother in Tiara and Imran Ali’s drawing room, feeling a little impatient. No one seemed to notice his distraction. The two women were caught up in excited chatter about the latest parties, and his father was engaged in a discussion about politics with Mr. Ali that Naseer found only mildly interesting. So far nothing had been mentioned about their daughter, not that he was expecting it this early. Some twenty minutes into the conversation, a young girl carrying a tray of tea approached the group. As she put the tray down on the center table, Naseer’s gaze caught her eye, and a look of embarrassment crept across her face.

“*Berta*, please have a seat. Join us,” said Suriya.

Masooma shyly took a seat across from her mother. It was perfect because it gave Naseer a discreet view of the girl. He had to admit that she was a lovely girl with beautiful skin and long brown hair—an endless supply of waves that reached almost to her knees. Her smile contained a mixture of warmth and innocence. He could get used to looking at a girl like that, but one thought nagged his mind—what about Humara? The visit did not end before Imran Ali mentioned some useful contacts he had that would benefit Naseer’s interests. They were key players that could do much to alleviate his current difficulties. Suriya Ashruf took a glance back at her son. She knew he had been pleased.

It was decided that a week from Friday, marking the beginning of the new moon, would be the most auspicious day for the engagement. The Ashrufs would arrive with

an engagement ring, traditional sweets and gifts, and the families would finally make it official.



There was no one more excited at the thought of the engagement than Masooma Ali. Despite her family's social standing, she was a simple girl whose ambitions did not reach beyond being a good wife and a good mother and throwing delightful dinner parties and teas for her friends and family. In short, an existence much like the one she already had.

She had known this day would come and had patiently looked forward to it, but now that it was here, on the cusp of her engagement, it all seemed to be happening so fast, like falling down a well that one never noticed was there. Masooma was feeling unusually tired that night, and decided to give in to the dreams of domestic bliss that danced around her mind, sweet visions of children and laughter and *halwa*—all of Masooma's favorite things. It was with these things on her mind that she entered into a seductive sleep that seemed to take her into avenues of delight but, at some point during the night, these fanciful dreams *seemed* to turn. A distressed look crossed her face, as if something darker had crept in. Masooma began to toss and turn, murmuring words that were unrecognizable and sentences that seemed like gibberish. She began to perspire and breathe deeply, almost gasping for air, and just when one thought she might sit up and scream as her discomfort seemed to become unbearable, a serene expression came across her face, and Masooma drifted off into a deep slumber, peaceful and relaxed once more.

When morning came, Masooma felt wide awake and alert. The dark dreams that had plagued her earlier in the night had disappeared without a trace, leaving Masooma with little memory of her night's adventure. She stretched lazily, confident that all was right with the world, and that this day, the day of her engagement, would be engrained in her memory. She sat up in bed, feeling lighter than usual, wondering what she should have for breakfast, hoping there were fresh eggs and milk. A cool breeze seemed to pass through her hair. *She noticed a couple of broken strands on her pillow.*

As she sat up, she noticed that more and more strands of hair had fallen off. Removing the blankets, she saw that the strands had turned into locks, and the locks had turned into clumps. Panic started to set in. She ran to the mirror and let out a piercing scream.

It was her mother who heard her first. Tiara Ali was in the drawing room when her blood turned to ice. She ran to her daughter's room, but when she arrived, a servant was already there, standing in the doorway with a shocked expression on her face. Mrs. Ali entered her daughter's bedroom and saw Masooma standing in front of the mirror, her hair gone. There was nothing left but patches of bald spots exposing her pink skull and locks and locks of beautiful brown hair all around her.