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Saturday 24 November 2001 – Day One

It was the way the young policeman said it that stopped him. The soft voice, almost a whisper and with eyes downcast so as not to witness the embarrassment his observation was sure to cause. ‘You’re doing something ---?’

The cigarette. Of course. Riad lowered his bag, careful not to move too suddenly and still there was the sharp twist of pain as he hunched to unsling the shoulder strap. Smiling at the young man in the olive tunic he mumbled an apology and slid the offending cigarette back into the crumpled packet. The policeman shrugged sympathetically adding that it was easy to make a mistake. He too found it hard these days, often checking himself at the last moment before inadvertently bringing something to his mouth. ‘It’s a constant vigil but the rewards are great. Allahu Akhbar.’

Riad nodded in agreement, forcing a wry smile he pushed his way through the milling sea of faces and bobbing heads to where he could see Ali waving at him. One week into Ramadan. The holy month.

How could he forget. Never one for breakfast he had snatched a quick coffee in his Jeddah hotel room that morning before heading to the airport for the short flight to Taif. He had enjoyed a leisurely smoke in the back of the taxi without any comment from the Pakistani driver but then that was to be expected. The tall dark man in the back seat was after all an Arab. Despite his casual western attire he was very much a Saudi in the confident way he moved and the subtle yet distinct way he rolled

the r's as he gave directions in short clipped Arabic. Yes, an Arab and yet something else there. Something in the way he looked at things; directly and with inquisitiveness. An open gaze. And then there were those eyes. Green with flecks of brown.

One to be wary of. Maybe even a policeman the Pakistani decided as he wove through the early morning traffic. Not one to confront about the fast. He would say an extra prayer at noon.

'Salaam aleikum.'

'Marhaba, Ali. Where's the madame?'

A broadly grinning Ali jerked his head in the direction of the car park as he struggled with the heavy bag off the conveyor. 'Waiting in the car, master. And with Rania here as well. The little one has an ice cream you know?'

Unable to suppress a smile Riad nodded. That would be his girl and knowing Fareeda he wouldn't be at all surprised if she had a bite or two herself. Better even if someone was watching.

He let Ali relieve him of the shoulder bag and saw the look of concern in the Palestinian driver's face as he noticed the bandaged arm. 'We were all very shocked to hear of the accident in Kuwait., modir,' he said as they headed for the exit.

'Thank you, Ali, I'm much better now.'

And he was, he reflected, if one set aside the odd sharp pain and periodic breathlessness, not to mention the recurrent nightmares that would still bring him sharply upright in bed at two in the morning, covered in sweat yet shivering with cold. Clearing his mind he took a deep breath of the warm sweet Taif air as they stepped into the bright sunlight. He instantly felt the pleasant dry heat tingle on his arms and neck. I'm home he thought, waiting for a lumbering Suburban van to glide past before following Ali to where he could see the family sedan double parked with the engine running. And about to meet my wife and daughter and for once we're going to have a great time and not go down those bad old roads again.

It was a promise he had made to himself when he first lay in that hospital bed two weeks earlier with a knife wound to the chest that had just missed his heart and a tube draining blood into a bubbling bottle and the stitches tight in his forearm where the surgeons had sutured the tendons. They were going to be a family now and he, Riad al Ajmi, homicide lieutenant and eldest son of the great Ebrahim Ajmi bin Rashid, would be that husband and that father and that son that all seemed to demand of him.

Nearing the car now he felt a sudden twinge of anxiety. What if Fareeda had changed? What if she had taken steps to put into practice those insane plans that had for so long been a barrier between them? Forcing the negative images from his mind he searched anxiously for a first glance of his daughter behind the darkened windows of the car. How would she look now? It had been six months and ... The door was flung open and a whirlwind of bright colours, wildly swinging ponytails and flashing dark eyes was in his arms and all but knocking him flat. There were those tiny arms wrapped around his neck so tight he would have choked had he not been all choked up anyway. 'Daddy!'

'Hello, baby! My, look at how you've grown!'

Wincing at the pain the sudden exertion had brought on he quickly knelt down and held her at arm's length with his good arm. He saw the concerned look in those impossibly dark eyes as she stared at his bandaged arm where the beginnings of a blood stain was just starting to show. 'Did they hurt you very badly, daddy?' she said so softly he had to strain to hear her.

'I'm much better now, baby,' he answered brightly as he blinked away the tears that were the product of a peculiar combination of pain and emotion.

She studied his face for what seemed like a long time, as if to memorise every detail and reassure herself that this stranger with the easy smile and the tight black curls was indeed the father she had said a prayer for every night for so long now.

‘I’m glad you’re back, daddy,’ she said at length. Adding with a note of solemn admonition, ‘And I’m not “baby” anymore. I was seven years old last month!’

Riad nodded making a face. ‘A big girl. Soon the boys will be causing me headaches!’

And thank you, he mused, for not mentioning that I’d all but forgotten that precious birthday had your mother not reminded me that evening when you stubbornly refused to go to bed while you waited for the phone call.

‘They are already swarming like bees.’

Riad straightened up to look at his wife. Even swathed in the ubiquitous formless black abeya, her hair covered by the obligatory headscarf there was no denying she was a beautiful woman. As always the eyes had it. In the world of the cover all hijab Saudi women had little more to flirt with than their eyes. In keeping with the guile of the sisterhood they were carefully made up to lure and tease and offset that fine aquiline nose and the full oh so expressive lips that would part to hint at the whitest most perfect teeth God had ever given to a woman.

But it was above all the way she moved. Tall and slim she swayed with an easy confident stride that was the legacy of the cocktail circuit of Boston all those years ago. It made the abeya alternately float and cling and dance and drew the eye of every man within one hundred yards who was not blind or hopelessly mad. The shoes played a role, of course. Manolo Blahnik, if he remembered correctly, with six inch stiletto heels that made those impossibly long legs go on forever. And, Riad didn’t have to close his eyes to conjure up the image, underneath that formless piece of matt black medieval cloth she would be wearing a pair of blue designer jeans and a tank top. Dior or maybe even Tom Ford’s summer collection.

Unless, of course, she was wearing nothing at all.

‘Hello, Fareeda,’ he said in English.

‘Welcome back, darling.’ She pecked him on the cheek even as he

searched for the slightest inflection in the “darling.” Oblivious to the stares of the passers by at this unseemly show of public affection between the sexes she led the way back to the car getting into the back with Rania as Ali finished stowing the bags. Minutes later they were on their way with Riad leaning back against the soft seat padding thankful for the extra leg space after the cramped confines of the flight. As they navigated the light traffic to take the road down into the valley he could just begin to see the white outlines of the large rural town that was Taif.

He wondered how long it would take for the first roadblock to come up. Reckoning less than ten minutes, he found himself wearily fingering the travel documents in his pocket. Rania was fiddling with her small pink plastic handbag, producing a crumpled crayon drawing and carefully smoothing it before proudly handing it over. It was of a couple holding hands with a child in the foreground playing with what looked like a cat. The background was blue sky with a palm tree. ‘That’s Milka,’ she said firmly, pointing at the animal.

‘She’s pretty.’

‘He’s a boy, silly! Mommy says there’s too many cats on the compound and he must go to the doctor so he will not have kittens.’

Riad nodded solemnly. ‘And how’s school?’

‘Miss Johnson says I’m the best reader in class. And last week I got a star for being the neatest!’

‘She’s doing so much better now that we’ve moved into the building next to the school. Living on the hospital compound also keeps those ghastly peasant cousins at bay.’

Riad knew what she meant. Shortly after the marriage they had moved into the family compound at Al Hada, a sprawling cluster of buildings in the elaborate three tier flat roofed style of the rich where Riad’s father resided with his two wives and at varying times Riad’s half brothers and half sisters and their spouses and offspring. The number of offspring was already impressive and the noise behind the high walls would rival that of any schoolyard at playtime. Fareeda had played the