

What Comes Next?

Written by Dr. Dana Al-Jada

The Author

Dr. Dana Ahmad Aljada, a physician and novelist, was born on 1984. She completed her education at the University of Jordan, where she studied medicine, then specialized in Internal Medicine. She later worked in multiple hospitals and medical centers across Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

She is the author of *“Five PM Friday”* *“Hope on the Moon”* *“To Whom I Might Never Meet”* *“My most precious 3 parts”* and *“The Dawn of a new Era”*.

I praise God for the gift of storytelling, and for His countless blessings upon humanity. I also thank Him for the blessing of art—an art that elevates people and immortalizes nations.

In our time, art is often accused of corrupting societies. Yet in truth, art is innocent of such claims. The real fault lies with those who have turned it into a tool for their personal desires.

Art, in reality, is a source of pride for nations. Its forms and meanings have expanded to touch every corner of human life. Who among us does not walk the streets and admire the art of architecture? Who does not visit gardens and witness the beauty of design and harmony? Who does not listen to the birds singing in the morning? Who does not own a beautiful painting at home? Who does not have a book resting on their desk?

Art in our lives is like colours to a painting—without it, beauty fades, and life grows dull.

I hold onto the hope that we may rise with art, and that art may rise with us, until we become among the nations remembered along the line of history—and until God, the Highest, is pleased with us.

With this, I dedicate this novel, after my father, mother and two daughters, to every artist who brings goodness into this world.

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About the Novel

Across the ages, many have wished to catch a glimpse of the future. But has anyone truly considered that such knowledge might not be in their favour?

Was there not a profound wisdom in concealing what is to come, in calling it the knowledge of the unseen, a realm God has kept for Himself alone?

Has anyone paused to think that the unseen itself is one of God's greatest blessings upon humanity?

God has bestowed upon us two great gifts: one for the future—the unseen—and one for the past—forgetfulness. Each carries its own quiet importance, gently pushing us to live, strive, and act in the present.

Within the events of this novel are traces of the significance of the unseen in human life, revealed through a style that is both chilling and captivating.

So, what would happen... if someone were to glimpse a fragment of the unseen?

Books By Dr Dana Al-Jada

عدد الصفحات	سنة النشر	الناشر	اللغة	الكتاب
1600	2008	دار الضياء	العربية	الخامسة مساء الجمعة
148	2009	دار الضياء	العربية	أمل في القمر
294	2010	دار الضياء	العربية	إلى من قد لا ألتقيه
208	2010	دار الضياء	العربية	وماذا بعد؟
200	2012	دار الضياء	العربية	أغلى ما أملك - دروب الأشواق
220	2013	دار الضياء	العربية	أغلى ما أملك - نحو المجهول
440	2016	دار الضياء	العربية	أغلى ما أملك - إلى الجذور
1860	2021	دار الضياء	العربية	طلع البدر علينا

Introduction

In the early days of my life, I never imagined that my grandfather had once passed through the very same stages I was living. He had been a child, then a boy, then a young man. And now, as I sit here in my eightieth year, counting the few white hairs left upon my head, staring at my weakened fingers and worn nails, I find myself gently rocking back and forth in a chair that offers the quiet comfort I seek. I wrap myself in a blanket to shield against the cool whispers of early autumn, and I look at my grandchildren—knowing with certainty that they are thinking just as I once did.

Only one of them dared to come closer. “Grandfather, is it true that this is your eightieth birthday?”

I smiled at him and said, “Yes, my dear boy... eighty it is.”

Soon, the rest of my grandchildren gathered around me. They ranged from three to twelve years old—full of life, restless, thinking only of play. Their questions began to tumble over one another: “How do you feel today?” “What will you do next year?” “Do you want us to bring you a gift?” “Do you remember happy days with Grandma?”

They were all thinking about eighty—about the long years I had lived, years in which I too had once been as young as they are now. But there was something none of them understood.

They pressed me again: “Would you like us to bring you something to eat? Don’t you want some meat? Wouldn’t you like to change your routine just for today?”

I gazed into their innocent eyes. They were kind, and they loved me—but they could not understand what I felt. How could they, when they were only at the beginning of life? As for me, life had carried me through its winding paths, casting me into a whirlpool of time from which I did not know when I might emerge.

“Grandfather... would you like some meat?”

I gently patted my grandson’s hair and said, “Thank you, my little one. But I will not change this habit for as long as I live.”

“Then what should we bring you?”

I paused for a moment, then decided to speak honestly—from the heart, in hopes that my words might reach theirs. “I don’t want you to bring me anything. I want only one thing.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to listen to a story I will tell you.”

The grandchildren sighed. They were used to hearing stories from long ago—used to hearing the same tales repeated by me, by their grandmother, even by their other grandparents. But... are grandparents' stories always so dull to young ears?

It seemed they gathered their patience, remembering that this was a special day for me. The eldest sat before me on the soft cushions scattered across the room, ready to listen—whatever I might say. The others followed, perhaps out of courtesy, perhaps already wondering how much time this would take. But... could a grandfather not have an interesting story to tell?

At last, I decided to give them something they would truly enjoy. I looked at them with a gaze they had never seen before and said:

“Do you think your grandfather cannot tell a story worth hearing? Then listen... Once upon a time, in a distant past, long, long ago...”

Part One
Introducing the Characters

Chapter One

University of the Arts

As lightning began to flash, thunder roaring across the sky, and the wind howling outside, I prepared myself to tell a story I had never told before—a story that steals the breath, astonishes the mind, and grips the senses. A story where imagination dances with reality, and the unseen melts into what is known.

“Once upon a time, in a distant past, long, long ago... there stood a vast and unsettling building, wrapped in mystery. It lay in the heart of the city, spreading across more than thirty dunams. No one knew who owned it, and no stranger was ever seen entering it.

Rumours circled around it endlessly, occupying people’s thoughts. No one would dare utter a word while walking beside it, and some avoided its street altogether, for every kind of myth and legend had grown around it.

Its structure was carved in stone, giving the impression that it had been built in ancient times. Yet it carried a strange elegance—as though, had it truly belonged to the past, it might have stood today among the wonders of the world: unshaken, towering, untouched by any living being.

Strangely, some claimed to have witnessed its construction, to have seen its pillars rise—though it had taken nearly three years to complete, with most of the work done after midnight.

A long wall surrounded the building, allowing no view except of its rear courtyard. And that courtyard... it was beautiful and immaculate. A small lake rested within it, bordered by carefully arranged flowers. There were also several benches—though everyone insisted that no one had ever sat on them. Perhaps only spirits had, as one rumour claimed.

And to this day, as I have said, no one had uncovered the identity of its owner, nor the purpose for which it had been built.

Days passed... until a newspaper announcement appeared:

“The University of Arts welcomes you and announces the opening of its first academic term. Those wishing to apply need only submit a pseudonym and specify the field they wish to study.

The university offers all branches of artistic disciplines and welcomes applicants of all ages.

It is located on Fifth Street, beside the main bridge that connects the city to its neighbouring town.

We wish everyone success.”

Though the address was clear, no one truly believed that this mysterious building had finally revealed its identity—or so we thought—and that it would at last open its doors to all.

The announcement was simple, and many chose to apply. Soon, more than five thousand students gathered around the building—men and women of all ages. Some had not yet reached ten, while others were past seventy. They carried every official document they could think of, though none of it was needed.

The application required only a pseudonym—on the condition that it not match any other—and a photograph taken at the time of registration.

That was all.

Not a single application was rejected.

Then, another notice appeared in the newspaper:

“Official classes will begin tomorrow, Saturday, at four o’clock in the morning.”

Chapter Two

The Open Check

One of the grandchildren asked, “Will anyone actually come at four in the morning?”

Another said, “Why such an early hour? The day is long.”

So, I replied, “Patience, my grandchildren... the story is still only at its beginning.”

One of them leaned forward eagerly. “And what comes next?”

I continued:

“Out of five thousand students, only one thousand five hundred showed up on the very first day at four in the morning. The university began by registering their names, and struck off all the rest.

It was not easy for anyone to wake up before four. Many assumed it was nothing more than a typographical error. But the university closed its stone gates and declared the beginning of the year with only those who had arrived.

At last, the teachers appeared. It seemed they knew exactly what this place was, what it stood for. They stood in a single line to receive the students, strange smiles drawn across their faces—smiles that almost revealed the secrets hidden within those walls.

The teachers were of every kind—men and women, young and old. There was even a child among them, no older than ten.

It should have been a warm and welcoming atmosphere—a beautiful place, pleasant weather, smiling faces. Yet none of the participants felt at ease.

There was something the fate was hiding. Something behind those walls. Something behind those smiles. Something that silently bound all the students together, without them even realizing it. They had become connected... tied to an inevitable destiny.

There was no leader among the teachers. They all stood in perfect order, like the teeth of a comb, welcoming the newcomers and offering their congratulations.

And then what?

The students were divided according to their inclinations. Some chose painting, others music, acting, storytelling, public speaking, poetry... The arts branched into specializations, and each branch into smaller ones. The path was not long—each person had to study one specific field and undergo daily training in preparation for the final exam at the end of the year. That was all there was to it.

One of the students asked what kind of certificate they would receive, and whether the university was recognized across the country or in neighbouring lands.

The answer was simple and direct: no.

One of the teachers spoke. He was a man in his early thirties, dressed elegantly, full of life. His smile was gentler than the others, and his hair was carefully styled with noticeable effort.

He said, 'This university is not listed in the records of global institutions, nor is it part of any international or local academic system. It is a very special university—one that exists only to develop talent.'

One of the students asked, 'And what do we gain from that?'

He replied calmly, 'Simply put, you will develop your talents in a modern way, under the supervision of the greatest masters of art from around the world.'

Another student protested, 'Is that all?'

At that moment, the oldest teacher interrupted. He was a man in his seventies, his face marked with deep wrinkles, his sternness barely concealed behind a forced smile. Despite that, he seemed strong, his voice firm and powerful, carrying the weight of an unyielding memory.

'You will receive this.'

He raised a small piece of paper in his hand, no bigger than a palm. Everyone tried to focus on it, but could not make out its contents.

Then he clarified:

'It is an open check.'"

Chapter Three

The Enrolees

The grandchildren gasped in awe. “Wow... a blank check!”

I nodded. “Yes. That was exactly what everyone was competing to win.”

One of them asked, “And who would give them this check?”

“From the university,” I replied.

“I mean,” he insisted, “who is actually going to pay them this money?”

“No one ever revealed the identity of the source,” I said. “Most of the enrolees assumed the funds came from the state.”

The grandchildren exchanged amazed looks. “That’s incredible.”

I continued the story: “Many applied to the university. They went through training, sat for evaluations, and were tested. But for now, let me introduce you to four of them.

Bassam was one of them—a young man of twenty-five. He was short, with a heavy build, short black hair, simple features, deep-set eyes, and a thin voice. He wore loose cotton clothes that suited his large frame, along with trousers tailored especially for him.

He was polite, the kind of person everyone described as routine and, frankly, a bit dull. He kept to himself most of the time and never joined the other young men in their reckless adventures.

His family was just as ordinary as he was. He was an only child. His father worked as a government employee, and his mother was a middle school teacher.

Though he was the centre of attention at home, Bassam had long grown used to holding onto his one true companion—a pen. Through it, he expressed everything he felt, sketching his thoughts onto paper.

He was talented in many forms of drawing. He had taught himself, learning through observation and trial, never once asking his father to enrol him in an institute to refine his skills. That was, until the university opened its doors.

When it did, he joined without hesitation, drawn by a rare opportunity: to study background art. This particular field had always intrigued him. He had spent hours watching films that relied on hand-drawn and digital backgrounds—worlds so vivid that the actors seemed inseparable from them. And he wanted to be part of that magic.

Bassam enrolled in the program and specialized in it. He excelled quickly, though he remained reserved. Still, he grew somewhat closer to his instructor, Miss Sumayya, who taught that very specialization. She supported him greatly, for she herself was exceptionally skilled in it.

Sumayya was in her late forties—an elegant woman with a warm brown complexion and a beautiful smile. Though age had begun to touch her, her features still carried a quiet, enduring beauty. Each day, she wrapped her hijab in a different graceful style, choosing colours as artfully as a painter selects shades for a canvas.

As for Bassam, he never cared much about the blank check. He was simply happy to have spent a year refining his talent—learning from an inspiring teacher and developing his skills in a remarkably short time. He was fully prepared to return to his quiet, routine life outside.

Completely unaware... of what that year still had in store for him.”



Bassam



Sumayya

Chapter Four

The Second Enrolee

One of the grandchildren leaned forward and asked, “Does Bassam play a major role in the story?”

“Yes,” I replied, “you should remember him well. He is a polite young man.”

Another shrugged and said, “But he’s boring!”

“That doesn’t make him any less good,” I said gently. “He is a kind-hearted, simple soul.”

One of the granddaughters interrupted with curiosity in her eyes. “What about that handsome teacher? What’s his name?”

I laughed at her eagerness and said, “Alright, I was about to mention him soon anyway. His name is Ihsan. He’s the music teacher. There isn’t an instrument he cannot master, but he is especially skilled with the violin and the flute—they are his favourites.”

The granddaughter smiled, clearly pleased with the answer, as if she had been waiting for news about Ihsan all along. But now it was time to move on.

“As for the second enrolee you should get to know,” I continued, “his name was Farid. Unlike Bassam, Farid was reckless, bursting with youthful energy, even though he was three years older than him.

Farid always loved to stand out, to be seen, to live beneath the spotlight. It was no surprise that he chose acting as his path.

He kept his head completely shaved, leaving only a small beard—the kind considered most attractive in those days. He took great care of his physique; he was tall, broad-shouldered, with fair skin touched by a faint blush. He often wore sunglasses and was always impeccably dressed.

He came from an exceptionally wealthy family. His greatest passion, however, was cars—fast ones—and he drove them with dangerous recklessness.

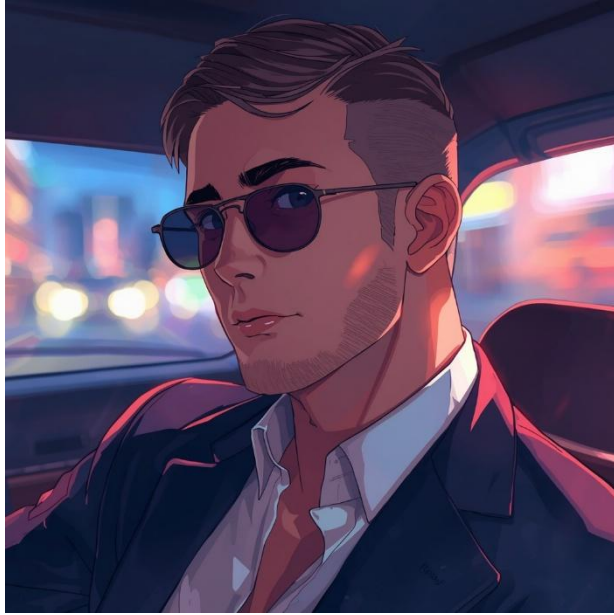
As for his family, his father worked in a private maritime trading company, while his mother was a well-known fashion designer. He had an older brother studying computer science at a prestigious university, though he did not share Farid’s artistic inclinations. They also had a younger sister, a spoiled little girl of five.”

“And since we’re speaking of acting,” I added, “let me tell you a little about the instructor of this field.

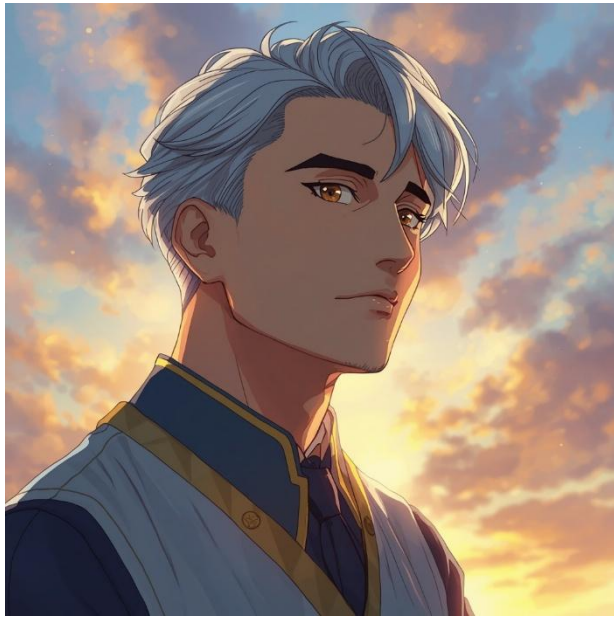
He was in his fifties, yet age had not dimmed his brilliance—if anything, his experience only sharpened it. It showed clearly in his performances. He could play any role he wished—comic or tragic, clever or foolish, poor or wealthy.

His name was Diaa. He was fair-haired, short in stature, slender, with cropped hair. He carried a lively energy in his lectures, full of movement and passion.

But Farid paid him little attention... and in return, Diaa did not seem to give Farid any special focus either.”



Farid



Diaa

Chapter Five

The Third Enrolee

One of the grandchildren asked, “Was their relationship bad?”

“No,” I replied, “it wasn’t bad—but let’s just say there wasn’t really a relationship to begin with.”

Another grandchild frowned. “But Farid should be careful. He might not succeed if he doesn’t impress the professor.”

“They didn’t have a relationship,” I said calmly, “but that doesn’t mean the professor wasn’t fully aware of every enrolee and their abilities. He knew a great deal about all of them. And besides, Farid didn’t need that open check to make money.”

The grandchildren were astonished by the immense wealth Farid seemed to live in. But now, it was time to bring the third enrolee into their imagination.

“The third enrolee was named Shadi,” I continued. “A young man of thirty-two—the oldest among the four. He was tall and handsome, with long hair and wide eyes that seemed to drip with pride. He kept his face clean-shaven, and he chose his clothes with care—elegant in appearance, even if they were inexpensive.

Shadi came from a middle-class family. He had two younger sisters, and he had recently proposed to a twenty-six-year-old woman named Qamar.

The engagement had not been easy for him. He had struggled to prepare everything required in those days, and after all that effort, he was forced to postpone the wedding due to the overwhelming expenses.

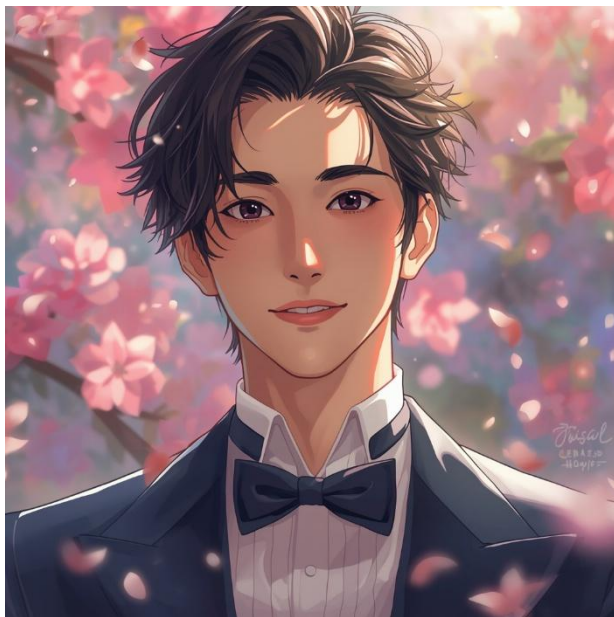
But then again, that was the reality for most young men at the time.

As for his passions, Shadi was an ambitious musician. He loved both the piano and the violin, and from the moment he joined, his talent had been clear. He had already trained in several clubs and learned under the guidance of professionals.

His instructor at the university was Ihsan—the same one we spoke about earlier. Ihsan treated everyone with kindness and respect, and he knew that Shadi possessed something that set him apart from the others. Still, he treated all his students equally.”



Shadi



Ihsan

Chapter Six

The Fourth Enrolee

One of the grandchildren said, “There’s still the fourth enrolee.”

A young girl asked eagerly, “Is it a girl?”

I looked at her and said gently, “Don’t wish for that... it wouldn’t be something good for her.”

“Why?” she pressed.

“Don’t rush the story,” I replied. “The fourth enrolee was a sorrowful soul. I could tell his tale as a pure tragedy. He was an orphan, father and mother gone, caring for a small family of three—two girls and a younger boy.

His name was Rawi. He was thin, with soft brown hair and hazel eyes that seemed to melt into a sea of sadness. His pale complexion and weary body spoke of endless exhaustion, of burdens carried day and night.

What drew him to the university was his love for writing—a love that had never earned him a single coin. Yet deep inside, he believed that storytelling was the path God had created for him. Despite all the hardships he tasted each day, his faith that God would one day turn his fragile pen and trembling hand into something meaningful in this world—that was what kept him going.

His siblings were younger than him. He was eighteen years old, with a sister of fifteen, another of twelve, and a younger brother who was ten.

Six years had passed since his mother died of tuberculosis, a disease that consumed her body due to lack of proper care. His father had remarried and left Rawi to take care of his younger siblings ever since.

Rawi had no choice but to divide his days between study and work. His academic performance suffered, and none of the jobs he took brought in enough money. More often than not, he deprived himself for the sake of his siblings.

No one paid attention to his interests or his writing. And since it brought him no income, he never bothered to show it to anyone. His only concern had been earning money—until that university appeared before him, and the idea of the open check became something beyond imagination.

Unlike Farid, whose life did not revolve around it, Rawi’s thoughts were fixed on that open check—and on his passion for writing, which he hoped would open doors for him and his younger siblings.

Rawi's instructor was a seasoned writer, skilled in every form of writing. He excelled in both comedy and tragedy, in long novels and expressive short stories. He shared his ideas and creativity with Rawi, who absorbed a great deal of knowledge from him and developed rapidly—despite having so little time between work, study, and writing.

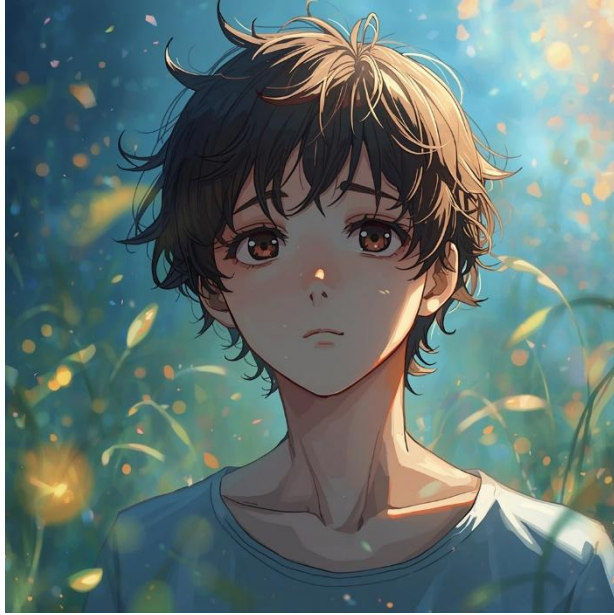
The instructor was in his forties, named Asad. He carried an air of indifference, as though formality had been forced upon him against his will. You could often notice his constant attempts to loosen his shirt buttons, untie his necktie, or roll up his sleeves to his elbows.

Yet beyond that, he was handsome, kind-hearted, and calm in nature. He loved a peaceful, pleasant atmosphere, and his lectures often drifted within that gentle mood.

He managed to help Rawi, to prepare him to write with excitement and creativity. Rawi was deeply grateful—yet even then, his dreams barely stretched beyond that open check.”

My granddaughter interrupted, unable to wait any longer. “So... which one of them got the check?”

I laughed softly and said, “That is what we will find out tomorrow, at the annual ceremony. But for now, it's late. Get some rest... and I will continue the story at the same time tomorrow evening.”



Rawi



Asad

Part Two
After Graduation

Chapter Seven

The Beginning

I sat there, my eyes fixed on the raindrops slipping down the window—first a soft drizzle, then heavier and heavier drops, before the rain paused once more.

It was as though a plan had been drawn with flawless precision. Every drop knew exactly where it was meant to go, guided by an unseen sender. Not one drifted to the right or left, nor did another share its path.

One day, each drop would reach the soil, be swallowed by the earth, and find its way into the trees. Every drop within a tree, every particle within a cell—everything moved according to a single, perfect design.

Are we not, in our journey through this world, like those very drops of water?

I had longed deeply to write down these thoughts, but a tremor that had taken hold of my body years ago had made me incapable of expressing myself through writing. Still, I had not lost my voice. And so, once again, my grandchildren gathered around me—this time of their own will—eager for me to continue the tale.

One of them said, “Remind us, Grandpa, of the characters again.”

“With pleasure,” I replied. “You remember the four enrollees: Bassam, Farid, Shadi, and Rawi.

As you know, these were only names they used inside the university. Bassam was a painter, Farid an actor, Shadi a musician, and Rawi a writer.

They were taught by Soumaya, Diaa, Ihsan, and Asad.”

One of my granddaughters jumped excitedly. “Yes—Ihsan!”

I laughed at her enthusiasm, then went on, “Bassam was calm by nature, Farid was wealthy and impulsive, Shadi was ambitious, and Rawi... was sorrowful.

Soumaya was beautiful, Diaa was remarkable, Asad was indifferent, and Ihsan...”

My granddaughter interrupted, smiling, “Was handsome.”

Chapter Eight

Graduation

I continued the story: “And then the promised day finally arrived—the day of graduation, the day the ideal enrolee would be announced, the one who would receive the open cheque.

It was a grand celebration attended by all the enrolees and teachers, and for the first time, it was also open to the public.

The place was filled with festivities and bazaars. Many merchants had seized the opportunity to display their goods, and even some of the enrolees offered their own creations for sale that day.

It felt like an open festival. Yet despite everything, everyone was waiting for one thing only: the result that would be announced at six in the evening.

The atmosphere was beautiful. Excitement filled the air. Trade flourished everywhere, and creativity seemed woven into every corner.

Bassam displayed several of his paintings and managed to sell many of them. Farid performed a number of daring stage acts, while Shadi played countless beautiful melodies.

As for Rawi, he was still working to earn enough to feed his family, even on graduation day. He never truly expected to win the cheque, though he had planned to arrive at the celebration by five o'clock.

The teachers also participated in the performances. Their levels varied, but no one yet knew who among the enrolees was the fortunate one.

Time passed.

The hour drew near.

Tension spread through the place.

Who would announce the result? And who was the owner of the open cheque?

The clock struck six.

The enrolees lifted their eyes toward the university's great central clock, where countless balloons floated above the water's surface, each one carrying the name of an enrolee in honour of their efforts.

At that very moment, the string of one balloon snapped.

It rose into the sky carrying the name:

Farid.

Not a single person spoke.

The square held thousands, yet no voice could be heard. Only the sound of the six o'clock chimes and the drifting balloon.

What was happening?

What did that balloon mean?

Was Farid the winner?

Was this truly the method of announcing the result?

Then applause broke out.

The teachers.

They were staring at the balloon and clapping.

The winner of the open cheque had been announced.

It was Farid.

The moment passed in a blur. No one had imagined the announcement would be so simple. No one even applauded from the sheer shock of it. All eyes simply fell upon Farid, who stood there smiling in stunned disbelief.

No one spoke.

No one congratulated him.

He himself did not know what to do.

Everyone was staring at him, and the feeling of envy hung heavily in the air.

Farid had nothing to say. For the first time in his life, he wished he had not been the winner. He already possessed more money than he needed, and the last thing he wanted was the jealousy of others.

Then the silence was broken again.

Another balloon snapped free and rose into the sky.

It carried the name:

Bassam.

The crowd erupted.

There was more than one balloon?

What was happening?

Meanwhile, the teachers continued applauding.

Bassam looked up at the balloon, then turned toward Sumayyah, who was staring at him with joy, clapping happily.

Even though he was the second winner, he felt delighted. Perhaps he would receive a good sum of money—not necessarily the open cheque itself, but any amount would be life-changing.

Then the third balloon soared upward.

By now, everyone had forgotten about the earlier winners. Hope spread wildly through the crowd. Perhaps two or three more balloons would rise.

The third balloon carried the name:

Rawi.

Rawi screamed.

Then he burst into tears of joy.

He had won.

Won something—anything.

Any victory was beautiful.

He jumped, shouted in celebration, and ran wildly through the crowd.

At last, he could improve his family's life.

Finally, the fourth balloon rose carrying the name:

Shadi.

Shadi lifted his hand happily, while his fiancée beside him jumped with excitement.

He had succeeded.

All eyes remained fixed upon the balloons.

Would there be a fifth balloon?

What came next?

And indeed, a fifth balloon rose into the air.

Written upon it was only one word:

Thank you.

Silence fell over the entire place.

That was all.

Everything had come to an end.”

Chapter Nine

The Four

One of the grandchildren said, "So there wasn't just one winner?"

I replied, "All four of them succeeded together."

One of my granddaughters asked, "And what will they do now?"

I continued calmly: "The crowd slowly dispersed from the square, leaving only the four standing there while the teachers congratulated them."

Rawi immediately asked, 'Which one of us will receive the open cheque?'

Asad answered, 'All four of you.'

Shadi's fiancée asked in confusion, 'And how will they divide it?'

Sumayyah laughed and said, 'It's an open cheque. No matter how much one of them takes, it will never reduce what the others receive.'

Bassam asked, 'Then where do we collect the cheque?'

Diyaa replied, 'You have a meeting at eight o'clock in the First Hall. Get to know one another until then.'

The teachers congratulated the four winners, and Shadi's fiancée left after warmly celebrating his victory and the cheque. The four remained seated together, introducing themselves, unaware of the fate that now tied them together.

Farid, as usual the boldest among them, began first. 'Since each of us already knows the others' names, let each of us explain the art through which he earned this valuable prize.'

Bassam smiled faintly and said, 'Why don't you start?'

'With pleasure,' Farid replied proudly as he stood up. 'I'm an actor. And apparently everyone agrees that I'm a first-class one. I can perform comedy and tragedy alike. I can imitate both the young and the old. I can become any character I choose.'

Bassam then said, 'As for me, I'm a painter. I joined the university to master background painting, and honestly, I never imagined I'd be chosen as one of the winners.'

At that moment, Shadi lifted his violin and began playing a breathtaking melody. Hope and sorrow blended together strangely within the music.

When he finished, he said quietly, 'I'm a musician. I can play every musical instrument, though I prefer the piano and the violin.'

Finally, Rawi spoke. He was the youngest among them. 'I'm a writer.'

That was all he said.

He did not know what more could be said to strangers like these. In only a few minutes, they would separate forever, and he would return home to his siblings carrying the news of victory and a new life.

Silence fell over them.

There was nothing left to say.

They came from entirely different worlds, united only by art itself.

Someone had to break the silence, and naturally it was Farid.

'The market stalls are still open,' he said. 'What do you think about eating something together?'

The others agreed almost mechanically. They still had to wait until eight o'clock, and there was nothing else to do.

By seven, the sun had begun to set, and they had finished their meal.

Each of them had eaten something different.

Farid ordered a plate of pasta.

Bassam devoured a heavy chicken pie stuffed with potatoes and cheese, alongside a pasta dish and juice. Then he followed it with another pie and a bag of crispy chips.

Shadi drank only juice.

As for Rawi, he had long grown used to avoiding unnecessary food expenses.

Time moved painfully slowly, and boredom crept over the four of them.

Half an hour before the meeting, they headed toward the First Hall and stood silently before its doors until the appointed time arrived.

Then Professor Ihsan opened the door.

He smiled warmly at them. 'Congratulations. Please, come inside.'

No one had ever entered the First Hall before. No one had ever even seen who went in or out of it. It was as though all the mystery that had once surrounded the university had now gathered entirely within this single room.

The hall was covered with the finest red carpets, along with luxurious crimson curtains embroidered in gold. Elegant black leather chairs were arranged in a circle around an ancient wooden table.

The four stood in awe.

The ceiling soared high above them, adorned with seven massive chandeliers. Candles flickered upon the table and around the curtains, bathing the hall in golden light.

All the professors were already seated around the table. Five empty chairs remained—one for Ihsan and four for the enrollees.

Everyone sat in a circle. There seemed to be no ruler among them. Though some were older than the others, each sat at the same table as equals.

The four took their seats where they were instructed, and Professor Ihsan sat as well.

Then the eldest among the teachers began speaking.

‘Congratulations on your remarkable success. My name is Jihad, the head instructor. And as I told you before, your prize is this.’

He raised a cheque between his hands.

The very same open cheque he had displayed on the first day.

The four stiffened in their seats. All of them had been waiting for this moment. Even Farid could not resist the burning excitement filling the room.

Then Ihsan added, ‘You deserve it completely.’

Rawi immediately said, ‘Thank you very much. May we take it now?’

A laugh suddenly echoed from the far side of the room. It came from a boy no older than ten. His soft brown hair framed green eyes that shone like emeralds. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and shorts suited to his age. His name was Walid.

‘You’re all far too impatient,’ he said. ‘This is only the beginning of the journey.’

The four fell silent uneasily.

Then Asad spoke. ‘This cheque has a purpose.’

‘A purpose?’ Farid repeated.

Sumayyah explained, ‘You are all creators. The purpose of the open cheque is to support your creativity.’

Bassam frowned. ‘What exactly does that mean?’

A blonde girl around twelve years old answered before anyone else could. She wore a beautiful white dress with a red ribbon in her hair. Her name was Dala’, and she sat beside Walid. ‘It means,’ she said, ‘that you will spend the cheque on an artistic project.’

Shadi asked, ‘What kind of project?’

Sumayyah replied, 'The goal of this university is to create something no one has ever created before.'

Diyaa continued excitedly, 'An extraordinarily creative cinematic masterpiece.'

Farid commented casually, 'There are already too many films in the world.'

Walid smiled. 'But none of them are great enough to deserve an open cheque... are they?'

The four remained silent.

Then Jihad said, 'You may work together to produce an exceptional film. You already have a writer, a composer, a painter, and an actor. You may also collaborate with any talented people you find suitable, hire any crew you want, use any location you desire. In short—you can do anything. After all, you possess an open cheque.'

Rawi stared at the cheque. 'So, this is the true meaning behind it?'

'Of course,' Dala' answered.

Rawi fell silent again. He had hoped to feed his family.

Sumayyah, who immediately understood what was passing through his mind, said gently: 'You can earn enormous wealth from the film.'

But it would require time. And effort."



Jihad



Walid



Dala'

Chapter Ten

The Fortune Teller

One of the grandchildren said, “The events are becoming strange.”

One of the granddaughters asked, “But can they really work together? I mean, they’re completely different from one another.”

“That,” I replied, “is the heart of the matter. They must focus on what unites them and forget everything that separates them.”

One of the grandchildren asked, “Can they actually do that?”

Another said, “They’ll have to find something in common.”

“Or,” I said quietly, “something may find them instead.”

None of them understood what I meant, but I chose to continue the story.

“The place slowly emptied, and the promise remained clear: the open cheque would only be granted in exchange for an artistic creation that would become the greatest in the world—a work unlike anything ever made before, and unlike anything that would ever come after.

Bassam was thinking deeply.

Farid was confused.

Shadi was astonished.

And Rawi was disappointed.

Only a few people still lingered in the courtyards, most of them preparing to leave. Even the merchants had begun packing away their goods.

Farid finally stood and said, ‘We should think calmly tonight and arrange another meeting tomorrow.’

Rawi immediately replied, ‘I don’t have enough time for this.’

Bassam looked at him. ‘Are you withdrawing?’

‘I want my share of the open cheque,’ Rawi answered bluntly.

Shadi sighed. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, but there is no personal share in the cheque.’

Rawi frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Bassam explained, ‘The money will only be spent on the artistic project we create.’

‘We never agreed to that,’ Rawi snapped.

Farid smiled slightly. ‘There was never any agreement to begin with. This university follows no ordinary system. It’s a private institution, and now its purpose has become obvious.’

Shadi paused thoughtfully before saying, ‘It’s not a bad idea.’

That was the first real turning point in the conversation—and it was an unexpectedly positive one.

Everyone turned toward him as he continued:

‘I mean... we could gain money, fame, everything we ever wanted. It would be wonderful to prove the creativity within us and finally earn the wealth we dreamed of.’

Farid grinned. ‘Looks like one of us has finally started thinking positively.’

Bassam crossed his arms. ‘We don’t even know what we’re supposed to create.’

Shadi answered calmly, ‘Every idea begins with the writer.’

All eyes turned toward Rawi. He immediately raised his hands defensively. ‘I haven’t agreed to anything yet. Besides, I have hungry siblings waiting for me at home. I don’t have time to build something when I don’t even know where it might lead us. We may fail.’

Farid shrugged. ‘Or we may succeed beyond imagination.’

‘Maybe,’ Rawi muttered.

Bassam added, ‘They gathered the best among us. We should at least be optimistic.’

Shadi nodded. ‘Perhaps the teachers truly believe in us. They worked hard for our sake.’

Rawi replied coldly, ‘Why should I care about anyone else? I only want money.’

At that moment, Farid said suddenly, ‘What if I paid you a personal salary while you worked with us?’

The others fell silent. It was an audacious offer.

Rawi stared at him. ‘You would pay me a salary?’

Farid leaned back confidently. ‘I’d pay all of you salaries... in exchange for becoming the leader.’

The idea sounded absurd, and they all knew it. Yet every group needed a leader, otherwise it would collapse before it even began.

The three of them began wondering whether Farid was suitable for such a role. Still... the idea of salaries was tempting.

Farid continued quickly, his mind already racing ahead. 'Don't misunderstand me. I'll prepare a contract determining the percentages of the final profits. Naturally, we won't all receive equal amounts after the project is completed. As the leader—and since I'll be paying your salaries during the entire process—I should receive a larger share. You'll need to agree to that.'

Farid was thinking faster than the others could follow.

Finally, Bassam said, 'We need to think calmly. Let's meet again tomorrow.'

Everyone agreed.

And for the first time, Rawi seriously considered the offer. If money truly awaited him at the end of this path, then perhaps he could accomplish the impossible.

The four of them began walking toward the university gates. Among the last remaining figures near the entrance sat an old fortune teller. Her back was bent with age. She covered her face, hands, and every part of her body with dark, ragged clothing. A black veil hid her face entirely, while strings of fake pearls swayed gently in the breeze, giving her an unsettling mixture of mystery and authority.

She sat beside a small tent filled with strange artifacts—copper and wooden objects, bizarre containers holding mysterious liquids, and tiny distorted creatures floating inside glass jars. Everything about the place seemed designed to force belief upon anyone who saw it.

The fortune teller herself sat upon a worn wooden chair behind a decorated round table. At its centre rested a glowing crystal ball, within which a cloud slowly swirled between shades of white, grey, and black.

She was the very image of a true fortune teller. Motionless as a statue. No matter how many people stared at her, she never turned her head. It felt as though she saw everyone without needing to look at them.

Just as she had caught the attention of the crowd earlier, she now caught the attention of the four young men.

But Farid was the most intrigued. 'What do you think about this?' he asked eagerly.

Bassam frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'We ask the fortune teller about our future project,' Farid explained.

Shadi looked uncertain. 'Do you really think she can help us? She only predicts things.'

Rawi scoffed. 'She predicts nothing. She's a fraud. Everything she says is lies.'

Farid laughed mockingly. 'Yes, yes, and you'll stay gloomy and miserable your entire life. Give your life a little excitement for once.'

Without waiting for approval, Farid dragged the others toward the tent.

Bassam muttered weakly, 'We shouldn't do this... this isn't right.'

But Farid was the strongest personality among them. 'You don't have to believe her,' he said. 'Just try it.'

The four approached the fortune teller. Farid burned with excitement for a new adventure. Shadi wondered what he might hear. Bassam walked hesitantly, unable to oppose Farid. And Rawi was practically being pulled forward while protesting, 'I'm not paying a single coin for this.'

The four stopped before the fortune teller.

Farid immediately spoke. 'Greetings, wise fortune teller. Would you tell us the future of the four of us?'

Though her face remained entirely hidden beneath black cloth, the four suddenly felt her staring directly into them in a deeply uncomfortable way. Even Farid felt uneasy beneath her terrible stillness.

After several long moments of silence, her gaze moving slowly from one to another, she finally spoke in a rough, slow voice. 'You believe you will hear nothing important tonight.'

Her voice crept through the air like smoke. 'You believe this visit is only a form of amusement.'

Another pause.

'You believe you will leave this tent the same people you were when you entered.'

The fortune teller fell silent again.

The four stared at her nervously before glancing uneasily at one another.

Then she turned toward Farid. 'You,' she said calmly, 'will die in a car accident.'

Farid jolted backward.

But the fortune teller paid no attention to his reaction. Instead, she shifted her gaze toward the second young man—Shadi. 'You will die at your wedding.'

The words struck Shadi like a blade.

Yet the old woman had already turned toward the third, Rawi. 'You,' she whispered, 'will die in a certain store... you understand exactly what I mean.'

Rawi froze. For the first time, he wondered whether the fortune teller might truly mean every word she said.

Finally, she turned toward the last of them, Bassam. She stared at him for a very long time.

Then she said simply, 'You will die of a heart attack.'



The fortune teller

Chapter Eleven

And What Comes Next?

One of the grandchildren said, “It’s strange to predict something like that!”

Another asked, “Will this prediction affect their lives?”

I smiled and said, “Perhaps. But what you should notice now is that this was the beginning of the bond between the four of them. They had found something important that connected them.”

One of my granddaughters said, “But it’s not a good thing.”

“Not necessarily,” I replied. “Sometimes people are brought together by disasters.”

Another said, “They shouldn’t have taken it so lightly. Still, I don’t see how it could affect the course of the story.”

“Oh, it will,” I said. “And do not forget that the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, strongly forbade fortune-telling and believing soothsayers. But the four of them—may God forgive them—treated the matter lightly. For now, though, it is getting late, and you must finish your homework before bed.”

I heard the sound of my grandchildren protesting, and it made me happy to know they had become drawn into the story. But I said, “We will continue tomorrow, at the same time.”

Part Three
The Turning of Events

Chapter Twelve

The Unseen

I sat in my usual chair before the window, wrapped in a thick blanket that shielded me from the cold that swallowed the place every day.

The rain had stopped, yet the sky remained buried beneath heavy black clouds that threatened to change the weather at any moment.

Moonlight reflected faintly upon the clouds, casting a dark and miserable atmosphere over everything.

Weather like this always makes us remember the things we fear most: death, loneliness, sorrow, and sometimes the unknown itself.

Many people have wished to uncover the future, yet Allah kept it for Himself and named it the unseen — that hidden knowledge countless people long to discover, even though they are certain they will know it one day.

Isn't that a strange kind of impatience? Why rush toward something you are guaranteed to learn eventually? Do people not trust Allah's wisdom in the universe? Do they not realize that there is profound wisdom in concealing the unseen?

One of the greatest mysteries people obsess over is how and when their lives will end.

When... carries within it a severe test of daily perseverance in worship, and constant readiness in case today turns out to be the final day, even though most people choose to forget such undeniable truths.

But what about how?

My grandchildren gathered around me once more, eager to continue the story — a story which course was about to shift, which paths were about to change, revealing what became of the four successful recruits.

How deeply did the fortune teller's prophecy affect their daily lives? And was listening to her the greatest mistake they had ever committed against themselves?

None of my grandchildren had any questions. In truth, none of them could even imagine what was about to happen next.

So, I continued: "The following morning, Bassam woke up in his own bed, inside his modest room in the humble family home. Paintings decorated every corner of the walls, and the scent of colours filled the air.

The room was medium-sized, cluttered with scattered thoughts made visible — a sheet of paper here, a canvas there, pencils tossed everywhere. No one could mistake it for anything other than the room of an artist.

A small mirror hung in one corner, though it seemed he barely used it. Nearby stood a clothing rack exhausted beneath the weight of hanging shirts, shirts so enormous one might doubt their owner belonged to the human race. There was a double bed, and a wardrobe whose drawers had all been left half-open in careless disorder.

Bassam descended the stairs with heavy steps, greeting his mother good morning as she prepared to leave for school. His father was still sipping his coffee, waiting for the work bus to arrive.

Bassam sat beside him, unsure where to begin. But eventually he told him everything — that he had passed the university examinations and received an open check to create an extraordinary artistic masterpiece.

At last, his father understood the purpose behind the university. He never stood in his son's way, for he had always encouraged Bassam to sharpen his remarkable talent in painting. His mother, however, had wanted him to pursue a career that would bring abundant money. But Bassam preferred isolation, painting, and food over work and wealth.

Still, money would come if he perfected his art.

And today he had a meeting with the remaining three recruits.

But first... where would he spend his day?

Bassam grabbed the nearest shirt within reach and left the house for a walk before deciding to head toward one of the large shopping centres. He took a taxi and called his friend to meet him there.

The roads were crowded, and Bassam arrived terribly late. The moment the taxi stopped before the mall, he rushed out in a hurry... Forgetting to pay the fare.

He sat with his friend, who immediately scolded him for being late. Bassam apologized, blaming the traffic. But no sooner had he sat down than he remembered — he had jumped out of the taxi without even looking at the meter.

He had not paid the driver.

Bassam sprang to his feet and hurried back to the place where the taxi had dropped him off, but the car was already gone. The driver had probably given up waiting.

Bassam returned to his friend feeling guilty for wasting the poor man's time. The driver was surely furious.

Meanwhile, his friend had already ordered a heavy meal that now covered the table before them.

The food looked irresistible: a plate of pasta drowned in melted cheese, grilled meat beside bread soaked in fat, sausages, fried kibbeh, along with appetizers, desserts, and every kind of fresh juice imaginable.

Bassam could not resist. He immediately reached for his fork.

But the moment the fork sank into the sea of pasta, the image of the fortune teller flashed inside his mind.

Bassam pulled his hand away from the table at once.

Thoughts stormed through his head. Was it possible that he remembered her prophecy now, of all times? Would her shadow haunt him at every meal? Could it really be true that he would die from a heart attack? And was this very food the reason?

Sweat gathered on Bassam's forehead.

His friend interrupted, asking whether something was wrong with the food, but Bassam denied it and began eating slowly.

He could not tell whether he was feeling guilt or fear. Was he truly allowing himself to believe a fraudulent sorceress?

Even as he tried convincing himself that the fortune teller was a liar, he could not finish his plate.

A heart attack... a heart attack... The words echoed endlessly in his mind.

Evening finally arrived, and the time for the meeting drew near. Bassam walked home while his friend dropped him off not far from the house.

As Bassam approached the street outside his home, he froze. It was the same taxi. The very same one whose driver he had forgotten to pay.

Relieved, Bassam rushed toward it, asking the driver to wait while he fetched money from inside the house.

He entered happily, opened a drawer in his desk, and grabbed some cash. Then suddenly he stopped.

Who had told the taxi driver where he lived?

The driver had picked him up far away from home.

Confused, Bassam stepped back outside and slowly approached the taxi. But he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her inside.

The fortune teller.

Dressed in the same black robes, her face hidden behind those same pearl chains, sitting in the driver's seat.

And then the taxi sped away into the distance.”



Chapter Thirteen

One by One

My grandchildren fell silent, as still as birds perched on their heads.

Perhaps they had too many questions to ask, but I let out a quiet sigh to separate the first story from the second. Then I began recounting what happened to Farid.

“As for Farid, he was washing his beloved car — a racing convertible with a retractable roof and speakers loud enough to shake the road itself.

Although servants handled the cleaning around the house, he preferred to care for the car himself. In fact, he would never allow the staff to go near it, nor permit anyone else to touch it.

There was only one exception to this rule. His little sister, Sura.

She was only five years old. She sat wherever she pleased and rode beside her brother whenever he took the car out for a drive.

Sura was endlessly spoiled by the family. She was the youngest child between two older brothers — enchanting with her soft black hair falling over her shoulders, her blue eyes, her tiny mouth, and her wide, captivating gaze.

Sura asked Farid to take her out for a drive, and he would never deny his favourite person anything.

So, they got into the car and set off.

As usual, Farid headed toward the highways, where he enjoyed driving his precious machine at maximum speed, feeding his sense of brilliance with speed and beauty combined.

But this time, unusually and without realizing it, he wasn't driving especially fast. Sura looked at him and asked, ‘What's wrong? Fouad drives much faster than this.’

Farid smiled. ‘You've gotten used to speed.’

She replied, ‘You always say there's no fun in careful driving.’

Farid laughed. ‘You remember our lessons well.’

Then he pressed harder on the accelerator.

Faster.

And faster.

Sura began cheering happily. She had grown accustomed to this kind of indulgence; to her, it had become part of what love felt like.

But Farid was thinking about the fortune teller's prediction.

The accident.

The one she had spoken of as if it were inevitable.

Could she have been right?

Was this car truly the thing that would bring about his end?

Then, at the edge of the road, he noticed someone standing there carelessly. No one would stand beside a highway surrounded by nothing but trees.

In a fleeting instant, Farid passed by the figure. But in that brief moment, he saw clearly who it was.

The same fortune teller. Standing at the side of the road.

He had no idea what she was doing there.

Instinctively, he eased off the accelerator and kept staring into the mirror. But the speed of the car carried him past her too quickly."



Chapter Fourteen

Next

My grandchildren remained silent, and I continued the story: “As for Shadi, he was getting ready to meet his fiancée and take her out for a short trip before the appointment.

He put on his finest clothes, used his best perfume, and styled his hair carefully in a way that always drew admiration.

His fiancée lived in a beautiful house overlooking green gardens and orchards, far from the noise of the city. The house was built in an old European style and reflected refined taste—hardly surprising, since its owner was passionate about art.

Shadi climbed the curved staircase and rang the doorbell. The maid informed him that Qamar had gone shopping with her friends.

He called her, and she told him she would return in the evening. Since their meeting had already been arranged for that evening, there was no chance for Shadi to see her now.

He decided to buy her a gift to celebrate being accepted for the great project. So, he entered a jewellery shop. He was the only customer there and began looking at necklaces and checking their prices.

Perhaps he had been chosen for an important artistic opportunity, but he still did not have much money, and he needed to choose something suitable.

He wanted to present himself properly in front of Qamar and her father, so he had to choose carefully.

His eyes drifted to the engagement rings. He picked one up and slipped it onto his finger for a moment—then suddenly remembered the fortune teller’s prediction that he would die at his wedding.

He quickly returned the ring to its place and stepped away from the display.

Then something caught his eye.

It was a silver necklace with a pointed red gemstone at its centre, surrounded by small shimmering beads. He picked it up and examined it.

At that moment, another customer entered the store. Because the figure was dressed entirely in black, Shadi noticed immediately and turned to look.

It was the fortune teller.

She wore the same worn black clothes, her face hidden beneath layers of pearls.

Shadi startled at the sight of her. But the shop owner interrupted and asked which necklace he wanted. Shadi answered nervously, 'I... I don't know. They're all... beautiful.'

Then he glanced back again.

The fortune teller was selecting jewellery as well. She walked beside the merchant, picked several pieces, then turned and left the shop without paying.

Shadi looked at the shopkeeper and asked, 'Is she one of your important customers? Or does she own part of the store?'

The seller looked confused. 'Who?'

Shadi replied, 'The woman who just left. The fortune teller.'

The seller smiled in surprise. 'A fortune teller?'

Shadi insisted, 'The one who just came in and picked some jewellery.'

The merchant laughed. 'There's nobody in the store except you.'

Shadi stared. 'The one who just walked out.'

The shopkeeper repeated calmly:

'No one entered this shop at all.'"



Chapter Fifteen

The Last

At last, I told them what had happened to Rawi, while astonishment filled every pair of eyes around me.

“Rawi had finished his work early that day, and now he had to prepare for the meeting.

He sat with his younger siblings for a while, checking on their studies as much as he could. Then he washed up, put on suitable clothes, and left ahead of time, deciding to walk to the meeting.

His route passed through small side markets. He looked like someone who knew the area well—his steps were steady and confident, with no need to glance around.

As he walked, he passed beside a tavern tucked away in a distant corner, a place that only opened for business at midnight.

The owner was sweeping the entrance. The moment he saw Rawi, he greeted him casually, like an old friend and a regular customer. He asked him how he planned to spend the evening.

But Rawi himself did not yet know what would happen after the meeting.

He promised the man he would stop by later, although he felt uneasy. Perhaps he would not come at all tonight, because the fortune teller’s prediction had not left his thoughts for even a moment.

Rawi continued walking, then happened to glance through the tavern window.

Someone was inside.

It was the fortune teller.

She was dropping pieces of ice into a glass of wine. Rawi stared in disbelief. He turned back and asked the owner whether she was one of his customers.

But the man replied that the tavern did not open before eleven at night... and there was no one inside.

Without hesitation, Rawi pushed past the owner and stepped inside, heading directly to where he had seen her.

But there was no one there.”

My grandchildren’s eyes filled with confusion and curiosity. Some of them had even started to feel uneasy, so I decided to postpone the rest until tomorrow.

“That,” I said, “was how it began.

The shadow of the fortune teller had started following each of the four, each in a different way.

What did she want?

What was she planning?

Would they see her again—or not?

Would she act—or remain only a warning?

Would her prophecy come true—or not?

And was the appointed time near... or still far away?”

None of my grandchildren spoke.

So, I smiled and said,

“That is what I will tell you on the next night.

But for now... you should try to sleep.”



Part Four
The Meeting

Chapter Sixteen

The Gathering of the Four

I do not think sleep found its way into my grandchildren's eyes that night. Each of them must have been occupied with a different thought about what they had heard. The astonishment in their eyes had surely given birth to countless questions drifting through their minds.

As for me, I kept looking up at the sky. It had been stripped of all light, its features erased. Not a single star could be seen, and even the moon had abandoned it that night.

I expected rain to fall at any moment. I would have preferred to continue telling the story beneath thunder, lightning, and heavy rain—but luck was not on my side today.

Luck. I cannot believe I am the one saying that word. There is no such thing as luck in this world. We live the portion written for us before we even came into existence.

What will we receive? Where will we be? When will we go? How will it happen? Who will we meet? How long will it take? And why all of this?

Questions whose answers arrive only in time.

But patience... patience.

And so, a new day came, and another night just like the one before it. My grandchildren gathered around me again, eager to continue the tale, though doubt lingered in their eyes—as if they feared that nothing good would happen from this point onward.

I asked them, “Do you want to continue?”

My oldest grandson said, “I never imagined things would turn out like this. I want to know what that fortune teller really is.”

One of the girls asked, “Why can only the four of them see her?”

I smiled and said, “The story is still long ahead of us. Trust me—things are only going to become more exciting from here.”

My grandchildren swallowed nervously, and I continued: “The four of them set off, each carrying confusing thoughts, heading toward the place they had agreed to meet.

The meeting was arranged at an elegant restaurant in one of the city's prestigious districts, and Farid had insisted on covering all the expenses.

Farid arrived first. He sat at the table that had been reserved in advance and waited for the others.

The restaurant gleamed with luxury, surrounded by exquisite ornaments and paintings. Its design was strange yet perfectly harmonious, overlooking the city beautifully while soft music drifted through the air.

Shadi arrived next.

Then Bassam entered.

Rawi was the last to arrive.

There was something shared among all four of them—a look of confusion and deep thought over something unreasonable, something impossibly distant from reality.

Each one imagined how ridiculous it would sound if anyone discovered what had happened. After all, the visit to the fortune teller had been nothing more than entertainment.

Yet none of them could push the events from their minds.

Farid finally tried to break the silence.

‘So,’ he said, ‘have you decided who the leader will be?’

The reaction was completely different from the day before. Everyone simply nodded in agreement, as though the matter meant nothing anymore.

Farid fell silent. He found no joy in his new position.

The food arrived, and the four of them began eating without speaking. Some drifted so deeply into thought that they forgot to take the next bite.

There had been countless topics meant for discussion. But no one started.

At last, for the first time, Farid felt the responsibility of his position—perhaps even responsibility itself for the first time in his life. He said: ‘We need to think seriously about the project we’re going to create. Remember—the check won’t be ours unless we work hard.’

Again, there was no reaction.

So, Farid continued: ‘At the very least, we should decide during this meeting what role each of us will take.’

Bassam replied: ‘It seems the roles have already been assigned. Each of us has our own talent.’

Farid said: ‘We need a shared idea for the novel. What do you suggest?’

Everyone remained silent.

Farid turned to Rawi. 'You're our writer. What do you suggest?'

Rawi answered: 'I can write in any field you want. Decide whatever you wish.'

The discussion continued for half an hour around the central theme of the story.

Little by little, the four of them forgot the events of the day, and the conversation captured all of their attention.

The meeting stretched on for another hour. Juices and a platter of fresh fruit were served to everyone. Fatigue began to show on their faces from so much thinking.

Finally, they decided to leave and meet again tomorrow in the same place. The four headed toward the exit.

Standing by the door was an elegant employee holding slips of paper for the customers.

Each customer picked one, unfolded it, and read either a piece of advice for the day or a glimpse of future wisdom.

The four of them took their papers and left.

Each opened his slip separately.

Inside all four papers were the same words:

(It was not an illusion.)"



Chapter Seventeen

Everywhere

You can imagine the anticipation in my grandchildren's eyes for what would happen next.

At last, the rain began to fall, and I finally felt the excitement of telling the story.

One of my grandchildren broke the long silence and asked, "Won't they tell each other what's happening?"

Another granddaughter said, "That would be better."

I replied, "But none of them knew what had happened to the others. Each of them had gone to the fortune teller only for amusement, and none of them realized this was where their little adventure would lead."

My youngest granddaughter said quietly, "That was bad."

I laughed and said, "Yes... and they took the matter far too lightly."

Another grandson asked, "What happened after that?"

I continued: "Bassam returned home thinking about what had happened. What exactly was the fortune teller? What did she want? He began to feel the seriousness of the mistake he had made by turning to her. He could not sleep that night. As soon as dawn broke, he got dressed and walked out into the street to breathe the cool morning air.

One hour.

Two hours.

Three hours.

People gradually began heading to their work, and the roads grew crowded. Bassam sat on a bench by the roadside, staring at people moving in every direction. Every person knew where they were going— except him.

He kept thinking. And thinking. What should he do? Was there even anything he could do? Was he the only one who had received that message inside the paper, or did it concern everyone?

He stood up from the bench without knowing where he intended to go. But the moment he took a step— he heard something strike the bench he had just left.

He turned around.

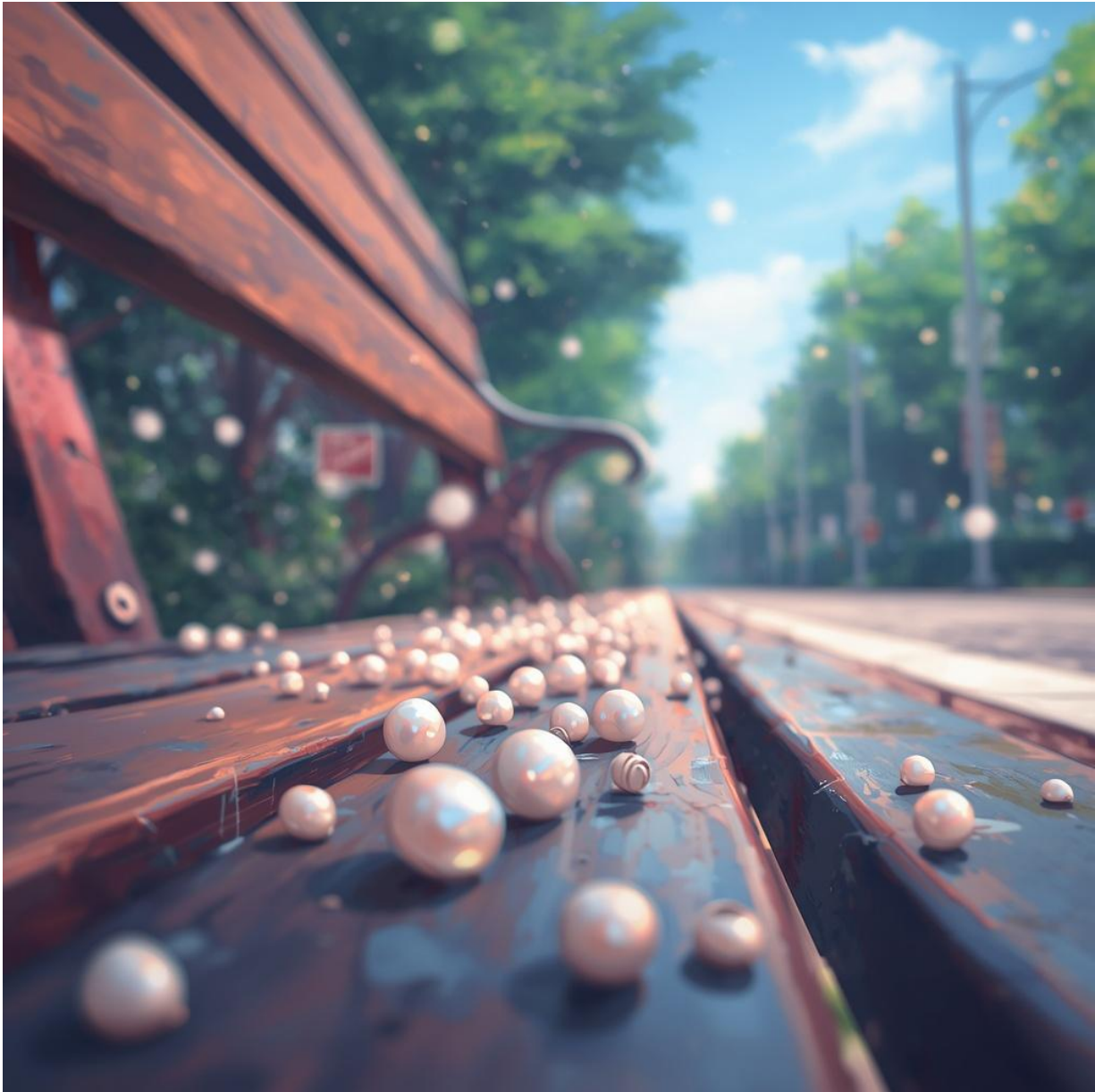
Pearl-like beads had fallen and scattered across the seat.

He looked upward.

There was nothing above that could have dropped something like that.

Where had those beads come from?

They looked exactly— exactly like the fortune teller's beads.”



Chapter Eighteen

The Car

My grandchildren remained silent, so I continued the story:

“As for Farid, he was taking care of his car, as he did every morning. He washed it, polished the steering wheel, and brushed the seats clean with his own hands.

This was his favourite ritual during every holiday. He would wake early in the morning, roll up his sleeves, and begin cleaning. Even the previous accidents had never disturbed his weekly routine.

This week, he decided to buy some new music albums. Perhaps they would make the holiday more enjoyable, or maybe they would inspire the creative masterpiece they were all still struggling to produce.

He got into his beautiful car and drove to the nearest store that sold music albums. He picked out several that suited his taste, then returned to the car and began flipping through what he had bought.

Then Farid noticed a photograph tucked among the albums. It was a picture taken inside his own home! In it, he was cleaning the car.

Where had that photograph come from?

Who had taken it?

But when he looked more closely, he noticed something else— the fortune teller was standing on the roof of the house in the photograph, watching him as he cleaned his car.”



Chapter Nineteen

The Fiancée

My grandchildren remained silent, waiting eagerly for what would come next, so I continued the story: “Shadi could not sleep that night either. He spent hours thinking about the fortune teller, but reached no answer.

Who was she? What did she want? Why was she following him?

Did the blank cheque have anything to do with it? Was she planning to steal it? But how?

And why was she targeting him in particular? Had he done something different from the others? Was he somehow more special than the rest?

At last dawn arrived, and he decided to visit his fiancée as early as possible, hoping it might free his mind from those useless thoughts.

His fiancée was surprised to see him so early in the morning, and he excused himself by claiming that he had missed her terribly.

He sat beside her, and after a short conversation, his eyes drifted toward the necklace around her neck. Instantly, he recognized it.

It was the very same necklace he had been staring at in the jewellery shop when the fortune teller entered.

A silver necklace. A pointed red gemstone. Tiny sparkling beads surrounding it.

It was unquestionably the same one.

He suddenly shouted, ‘Where did you get that necklace?’

His reaction was so intense that it frightened his fiancée, but he repeated the question insistently.

With clear carelessness in her voice, she replied, ‘Someone gave it to me as a gift.’

‘Who?’ he shouted.

She frowned at him. ‘Why are you so upset?’

But he pressed harder. ‘I said, who gave you the necklace, Qamar?’

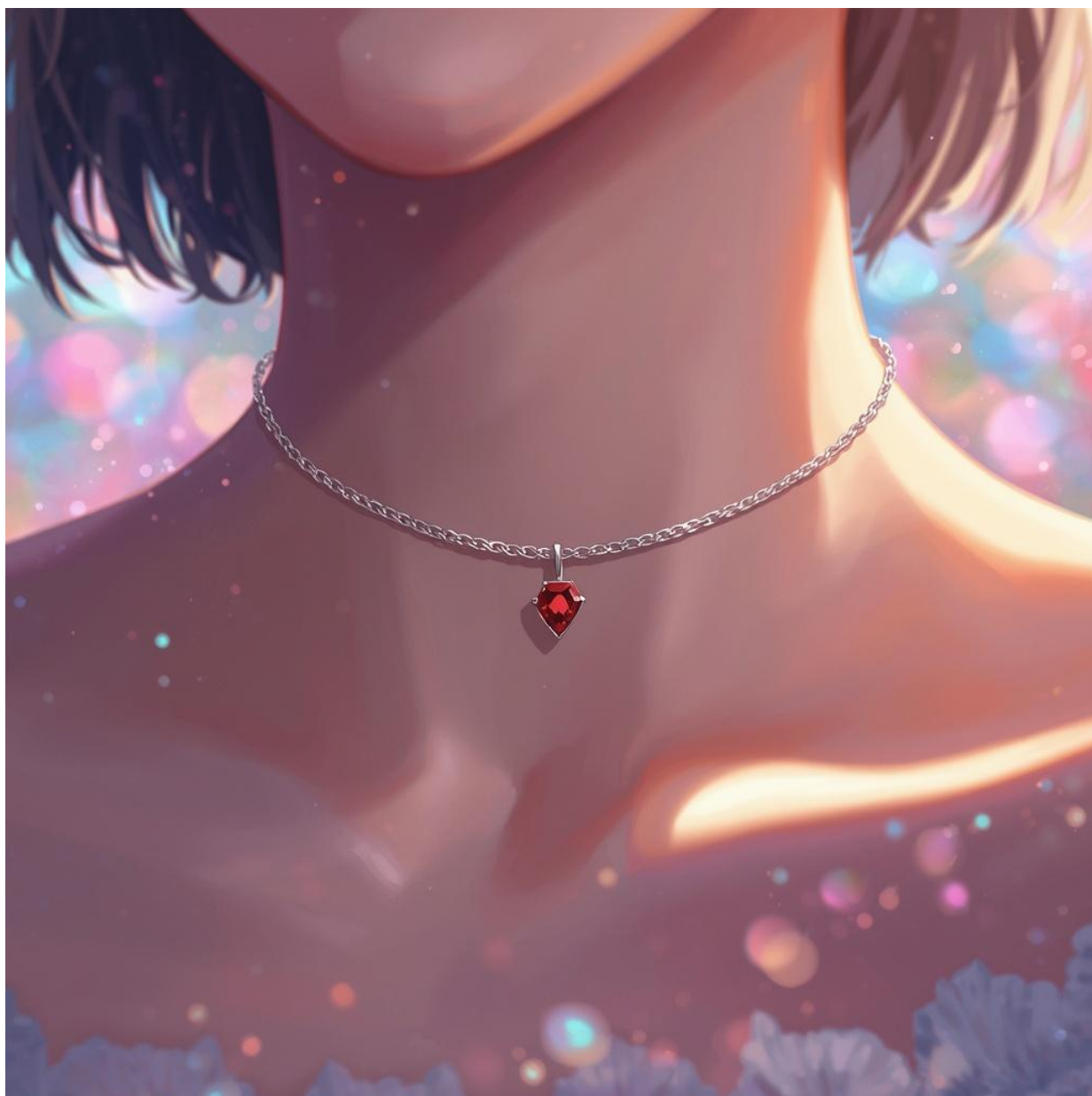
She answered, ‘Someone gave it to me because I looked beautiful.’

‘A man?’ he asked sharply.

She smiled, completely unaware of what he was implying. ‘Are you really that jealous?’

But he insisted once again, ‘Was it a man... or an old woman?’

Qamar could not understand what he meant, and the matter remained deeply confusing for both of them.”



Chapter Twenty

The Mother

My grandchildren were amazed by what was unfolding. The situation had grown strange, almost unsettling.

One of my granddaughters said, “It seems that Qamar doesn’t care much about details.”

I replied, “Qamar was a shallow character. She loved appearances—clothes, elegance, and showing off in front of others.”

My youngest granddaughter asked softly, “Does he love her?”

“Perhaps,” I answered.

They all felt there was more to that story, something unfinished. But I had to continue, for it was time to tell what had happened to Rawi.

One of the girls asked, “Does Rawi really keep going to taverns? Doesn’t he know it’s forbidden?”

I said, “He was weak in front of them. He believed that by going there regularly, his state of mind would improve. But he didn’t realize that he was falling apart, day after day.”

One of my grandsons leaned forward eagerly. “What did the fortune teller do to him?”

So, I continued the story: “Rawi left the meeting and walked on foot, passing by the same tavern again.

He decided to go in. He ordered a cheap glass of wine and chose a seat far from the one where he had once seen the fortune teller.

Even though he remembered her—remembered her presence in that very place—he could not resist entering.

He drank until he forgot what he had read, forgot everything that had happened that day. Then he stumbled out, making his way home.

Yet there was one thing he did not forget, despite all the alcohol—the grave of his mother. He visited it every single day.

That night, Rawi entered the cemetery, staggering. Darkness had already wrapped itself around the place. He approached his mother’s grave and stood before it, saying,

‘Hello, Mother... I’m sorry to come before you in such a state. But I wanted to stand beside you, even if only for a few moments.’

The silence was frightening. Yet he felt nothing—no fear, no awareness that he might not be alone in that late hour.

He sat there, staring at the grave.

‘Our lives have fallen apart,’ he said. ‘I no longer know what to do. My siblings are hungry... they need help. And as they grow, their needs only grow with them. I am drowning in debts I will never be able to repay.’

He fell silent, then let out a long sigh before continuing:

‘If only you were with us... if only my father were still alive... would I be wandering the night like this?’

At that moment, Rawi noticed the sand in front of the grave shifting. Something was pulling it downward.

He stepped closer, trying to see what was happening. Something was moving beneath the sand.

Then, slowly... a hand began to emerge from beneath the grave—its fingers gripping a bracelet of pearls.

Rawi froze in terror.

Then suddenly, he turned and fled the cemetery, leaping over the ground in long, desperate strides, running as fast as his legs could carry him.”

My grandchildren were frightened. Stories of graves always unsettled them.

So, I decided to ease their hearts for that night—and leave the rest of the tale for the next evening... if they could bear to hear more of its strange events.



Part Five
The Days

Chapter Twenty-One

A Monotonous Life

I leaned back in my rocking chair, watching the same view I sat before every day.

Some people might think it was boring, or that old age had reduced me to preferring the same scenery, the same seat, and the same conversations. But that was not true.

The reason I kept returning to this view was because it renewed itself every day, opening a new page each time I looked at it.

The moon, the stars, the clouds, the changing colours of the sky, the sunset, the mountains, the flowers, the songs of birds, the rain, the lightning, the thunder, and sometimes even the snow.

Everyone had grown so accustomed to these things that they passed by them without notice. People only seemed to appreciate their habits once they lost them.

So, what exactly were we waiting for? To lose the moon? To lose the stars? To lose the rain? And then what?

Of course, the scene would never be complete without my grandchildren hurrying toward me with eager footsteps, ready to continue the story.

“Are we continuing the tale?” one of my grandsons asked.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” I replied.

“Won’t they talk to each other about what happened? They all know the fortune teller.”

“They need an opportunity to come together first.”

“And will they get one?”

“We shall see very soon,” I said. “But for now, I need to tell you about Bassam’s daily life.

As I mentioned before, Bassam lived a dull, repetitive existence. Let me describe his routine in detail.

He woke up at noon. By then, both his father and mother had already left for work early in the morning. The first thing he did was reach for the phone, call a delivery service, and order a meal to the house. He washed his face, performed the noon prayer, and made his bed while waiting for the food to arrive.

It was chicken pizza, a fizzy drink, and fries.

Bassam devoured what he called breakfast, then watched whatever movie happened to be playing on television until two o'clock in the afternoon. By then, piles of food containers would be scattered around the room, while he lounged on the sofa in front of the TV.

At two o'clock, he sat down at his computer and browsed the internet, searching for new artwork and emerging artists. He chatted with them, discussed their future prospects, and talked about the fate of their creative work.

And the conclusion was always the same: no job opportunities in sight. Everyone suffered from the same problem. There was no position that suited his interests.

At five o'clock he shut down the computer and noticed that his parents had been home for hours, each busy with their own concerns.

Every day he chose a different restaurant, where he ate lunch with a few old friends. Once again, meat and potatoes. Then, at seven in the evening, he wandered through the public park until nine o'clock.

At nine, he returned home after spending the day observing countless people and gathering ideas for new drawings.

He picked up a pencil and drew whatever inspired him—anything from a scrap of paper to the walls of the house. He used whatever medium suited him, from graphite pencils to digital art software, and continued drawing until three in the morning.

That was Bassam's day.

He no longer distinguished between weekdays and weekends. Saturday was exactly the same as Friday. His mother had tried many times to persuade him to change his routine. She suggested a temporary job, joining a sports club, anything at all—but it was useless.

Then, at last, the university opened its doors. He enrolled, won the open cheque, and suddenly endless possibilities stretched before him. Everything he had dreamed of finally seemed within reach.

And yet the routine remained unchanged.

When would the serious work begin? Would it begin at all? If they failed to commit themselves, all his hopes would vanish into thin air. Would he accept that? Did he truly want his life to change, or was he secretly content with it exactly as it was? Did he really want to work?

He did not know.

The daily routine had wrapped itself around his life so completely that he could no longer imagine himself carrying real responsibility. And now the fortune teller had shattered that routine with brutal force.

He felt watched.

She had told him he would die of a heart attack. What more could she possibly want? Even if he were destined to die of a heart attack, that did not mean it would happen soon. Most people died that way eventually.

And what about the taxi? The pearls? And then what? Could he simply forget everything that had happened?

What about the others? What message had they received from the restaurant? Was he the only one who had been given that strange sentence?

The next meeting was scheduled for eight o'clock in the evening at another restaurant, as Farid had arranged. But was Farid really suitable to lead the group? Perhaps that was the least of his concerns.

Despite all these thoughts swirling through his mind, Bassam found himself stopping at a fast-food pastry shop. As usual, he ordered a meat-and-potato pie. He had barely taken his first bite when a scream erupted from inside the restaurant.

He turned toward the sound and saw a crowd gathering in panic. One of the customers had suddenly collapsed to the floor while eating.

Bassam was unable to get closer as the restaurant staff pushed everyone back and began performing CPR until an ambulance arrived. He stood there watching the ambulance until it finally drove away.

By then, he had completely lost his appetite.

He set his pastry down on the table and walked out."



Chapter Twenty-Two

Adventures

“One thing is certain,” one of my granddaughters said. “The fortune teller had nothing to do with that.”

“What incredible luck!” another grandchild exclaimed.

I smiled. “Sometimes messages reach us at exactly the right moment.”

My oldest grandson shook his head. “That was definitely the wrong moment.”

I laughed. “Perhaps.”

One of my granddaughters then said, “Let’s talk about someone more entertaining. Farid, for example.”

“Very well,” I replied. “As you know, Farid was impulsive by nature. Still, the recent events would have affected anyone. But first, let us step back and look at his daily life.

Farid woke up at nine every morning. He ate breakfast with his brother and little sister before heading straight to his car.

It was not just his habit. His brother had exactly the same routine. Each of them owned a car, and both took remarkable care of their vehicles.

As for their spoiled little sister, she loved accompanying her brothers wherever they went. She delighted in the speed, excitement, and friendly competitions they created on the roads.

To Farid, every day had to be special. Every day needed its own flavour and adventure. And so, little Sura had grown accustomed to a new adventure every single day.

One morning, Farid took Sura to the market. He ordered food for both of them and paid in advance. Then they headed to a toy store so Sura could choose a new toy.

When the order was ready, Farid returned alone to the restaurant, collected the food, and left.

A minute later, Farid and Sura walked into the restaurant together and asked for their meal. The restaurant owner stared at them in disbelief and explained that he had just handed the order over. But Farid insisted he had received nothing. Sura also confirmed that they had only just returned to the restaurant.

The owner was left utterly confused. Meanwhile, Farid became irritated by what he saw as poor service. As far as he was concerned, he had already paid for food that had never been delivered.

The owner grew flustered and prepared another meal at the restaurant's expense. Farid and Sura took it, still annoyed, and left.

Five minutes later, Farid returned alone. He apologized for taking a meal without paying and handed over the money for the order.

The owner was even more bewildered than before.

At that moment, Farid opened the restaurant door, and he and Sura walked inside.

The owner froze.

Standing before him were two identical men.

Both were clean-shaven, both wore the same short beard, both were the same height, the same age, and the same build. They were perfect copies of one another.

Sura burst into laughter as she looked at the restaurant owner. 'You're the third victim today,' she said.

Fouad laughed, Farid's twin brother. 'You've just been part of a hidden-camera prank,' he explained. 'Thank you for being such a good sport and treating us so kindly.'

The restaurant owner laughed as well. To his credit, he took the joke gracefully.

The three siblings left still laughing. They headed to the beach, bought ice cream, and decided to play handball.

Farid went to the parking area to retrieve the ball from his car. He walked to the trunk and reached for the handle. Then he stopped.

A red liquid was dripping from the back of the vehicle. For a moment, Farid hesitated. Then he gathered his courage and slowly opened the trunk.

What he saw made his blood run cold. Inside lay the body of a young woman, stabbed and covered in blood.

Farid slammed the trunk shut and ran. He left the car exactly where it was and sprinted back toward the beach. By the time he reached Fouad, he was gasping for breath. He could barely speak. He could not bring himself to describe what he had seen, especially not in front of his little sister.

Instead, he grabbed Fouad by the arm and pulled him along. Fouad had no idea what was happening, but he ran after his brother.

They reached the parking lot and hurried toward Farid's car. Then both of them stopped. The trunk was closed.

Farid was certain he had left it open. Even stranger, the car was spotless. There was no blood on the ground. No sign of anything unusual.

Fouad looked at his brother in confusion. But Farid rushed forward, unlocked the trunk, and threw it open.

There was nothing inside. Nothing at all.

For a moment, he simply stared into the empty compartment.

Had he imagined the whole thing?"



Chapter Twenty-Three

Preparations

“My goodness!” my grandchildren cried in unison.

“Was he really imagining it?” one of them asked.

“If someone was behind it,” another said, “why didn’t they frame him properly?”

“A body like that could have sent him straight to the gallows,” added a third.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “Or perhaps he truly imagined it.”

“That’s not fair!” my youngest granddaughter protested. “Tell us—was it real or was it not?”

I laughed. “Not yet. Don’t you want to hear more about the others? About Rawi and Shadi?”

“Of course!” they answered together.

“Well then,” I said, “as you know, Shadi was an ambitious musician. He first met Qamar at a grand event attended by famous performers. She had come with her father. Her chestnut hair cascaded gracefully over her shoulders, her large eyes were accentuated by carefully applied makeup, and her attractive lips, tall figure, and elegant crimson dress made her impossible to overlook.

Shadi was introduced to her father, who happened to be one of the event’s sponsors. Shadi dreamed of performing at prestigious gatherings like this one and playing before audiences of such distinction.

During their conversation, he met Qamar. She spoke warmly with him, and he gradually drew closer to her, hoping her father might one day help him organize a concert of his own and launch him toward stardom.

The formal conversation did not last long. Once he had learned a little about her, he found ways to keep track of her news and eventually spoke with her again. Before long, their relationship became serious.

Shadi proposed to Qamar, and her father accepted. He believed Shadi had a brilliant future ahead of him.

The engagement celebration was held in a luxurious hotel. To pay for it, Shadi had to borrow three times the amount he had originally budgeted, forcing him to postpone his wedding plans for an entire year.

While Shadi struggled to save enough money for marriage, Qamar spent freely and without concern. She was constantly buying expensive things, and Shadi felt compelled to match her tastes with gifts that were no less luxurious.

Whenever he took her to a restaurant, she knew of a finer one.

Whenever he bought her a jewel, she already owned a more valuable piece.

Whenever he purchased a dress for her, she had something more elegant hanging in her wardrobe.

But all of this seemed insignificant compared to the greater dream they were working toward. From time to time, Shadi tried to discuss the home they would one day share. Yet Qamar never gave him a clear answer. All she ever said was that she wanted to be with him and that she wanted him to make her happy.

It was a sweet response, but it never reassured Shadi. It was not a direct answer. He knew he had to provide a life worthy of her father's expectations. So, he let things continue as they were.

Then the university appeared, opening its doors.

He succeeded in becoming one of the prize winners. And yet everything still felt distant. The cheque. The prize. The film. Even marriage. All of it seemed far away.

And on top of everything else, the fortune teller had appeared. He had no idea what kind of phantom she was, what she wanted, or why she seemed interested in him specifically.

Did she intend to harm him? Or harm Qamar?

And what about the jewellery shop? What about the necklace? She had followed Qamar and clearly knew about their relationship. There was no doubt about it.

She was watching him. She knew who he was. The feeling terrified him.

But what was the point of all this? What had he done? Was it because of the prize? Was someone jealous of his success and trying to destroy his life?

And had he really succeeded at all? He had not received a single benefit from the prize yet, nor did he even know whether he ever would.

To calm his thoughts, Shadi went to the beach carrying his violin. He sat down and began to play, hoping the music would ease the tension that now seemed to surround every corner of his life.

He performed a gentle, soothing melody. Several people strolling along the shore gathered around him. They praised his talent enthusiastically. For the first time in days, Shadi felt a glimmer of hope. He was gifted. He knew it. His confidence returned. He

could achieve the impossible. Everyone wished they could be like him. Yet who were these people to judge his talent? They were not the audience he wanted. His real audience was out there somewhere, waiting in a grand theatre for the future star he would become.

Eventually, the crowd drifted away. As they did, one particular sight caught his attention. A young man and woman, perhaps newly married, were walking hand in hand with obvious affection between them. They both wore wedding rings.

Shadi imagined himself and Qamar in their place. No—something even better. He imagined her father fulfilling all his promises and helping him achieve every ambition.

He imagined a successful wedding, a successful career, and a successful future.

Then he turned his gaze toward the sea. Tourist boats dotted the water, carrying couples and families through the beautiful afternoon.

And then he saw her. The fortune teller.

She was aboard one of the boats, a vessel carrying perhaps twenty passengers. She was moving quietly toward the rear of the boat. No one seemed to notice her.

A chill ran through Shadi. He did not like seeing her there. And his fear proved justified.

Only moments later, the boat began to sink. Panic erupted. And one by one, the passengers jumped into the water.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

Circumstances

My grandchildren were astonished by that. The fortune teller again!

Now it was time to speak about Rawi.

“As I told you before,” I said, “Rawi lived under difficult circumstances. But none of you can truly imagine just how difficult his life really was.

Rawi had two younger sisters and a younger brother. What made his burden even heavier was that his brother Sami had been born with a permanent disability. His arms were unusually short, and his intellectual abilities were very limited. As a result, he was constantly exposed to danger, even in the safest places.

One day he swallowed several pencils from the table. On another occasion he tore pieces from the carpet and swallowed them. Once he stepped onto a flower vase, shattering it and cutting his feet so deeply that he needed medical treatment.

Sami had reached the age of ten and was still in this condition. He frequently spent several days in the hospital, and Rawi had to pay the expenses and stay by his bedside, leaving his two sisters alone at home.

Rasha was the older sister. She was fifteen years old and studying in the ninth grade. She had fallen two years behind because she withdrew from school for two consecutive years after suffering a severe emotional breakdown following her mother’s death and her father’s abandonment of the family.

Hanaa was twelve. Although she had been the closest of the children to their mother, she managed to overcome the tragedy successfully. She consistently ranked among the top students in every school year and deeply appreciated the sacrifices her older brother made to care for the household.

To understand Rawi’s daily life, we must begin with his routine—or rather, the lack of one.

Most nights he slept only three or four hours.

He woke before dawn to prepare breakfast for his siblings. Then he packed the lunches they would take to school and tried to study for a short while himself.

Afterward, he walked his sisters to the school near their home and escorted Sami to a special school for children with disabilities located three kilometres away.

Rawi could easily walk that distance every day, but it was difficult for Sami. For his brother's sake, he took the bus instead. Even then, he often endured the stares of strangers who looked at Sami with curiosity or pity.

Despite his limited understanding, Sami knew he was different from other people. He felt it deeply, and that made life even harder for Rawi.

After dropping him off, Rawi headed to work, setting his studies aside.

Sometimes he worked in construction and excavation. At other times he helped with simple marketing jobs. Occasionally he distributed morning newspapers. He accepted whatever work he could find, and there were days when he held more than one job at the same time.

He rarely ate anything between breakfast and dinner. Most of what he earned was saved for his siblings.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Rawi picked Sami up and brought him home. He also collected Rasha and Hanaa from school.

The three children ate lunch together at home while Rawi left once more to continue working.

At ten o'clock each evening he returned home to make sure Rasha and Hanaa had completed their homework. Sami was usually asleep by then.

Then Rawi would leave again. He worked until one o'clock in the morning.

After that he headed to a tavern.

There he spent two hours drinking before somehow finding his way home at an hour he could never quite remember.

Rawi had developed this habit after his mother died and his father left the country without ever sending a word.

Suddenly, he had been forced to face reality.

He was responsible for raising three children while he himself was still little more than a child.

He tried to balance work, study, and caring for his siblings, but one of those responsibilities always suffered. The first thing he sacrificed was his education.

He missed nearly every class.

For two years he survived through self-study and somehow managed to keep up, but eventually the subjects became too difficult. Gradually, his siblings' education became his highest priority, while his own education was pushed aside.

One night, while working late, a coworker took him to a tavern. At first Rawi refused to drink. But his coworker kept insisting during later visits, until eventually the habit became his own. Rawi took no pride in it. Yet for a few brief moments of intoxication, he could forget the weight of his worries.

He knew perfectly well that alcohol solved none of his problems. Still, he longed for any escape from the crushing reality around him.

Writing was his constant companion. He especially loved writing reflections and personal thoughts. But he never allowed anyone to read them. He poured every feeling onto paper, as though speaking to an unseen friend about his miserable life.

He never complained in front of his siblings. Instead, he confessed everything to blank pages and guarded them carefully where no one could find them.

None of his siblings knew about his drinking. He made sure of that. He understood that such a shame would follow them forever if people discovered it. Yet he could not bring himself to stop.

Then the university project appeared, opening new possibilities.

Together with the others, he had received the open cheque, and now he was expected to work alongside them.

At the very least, he would receive a monthly salary from Farid. He could continue his morning jobs as well. Perhaps, little by little, life would improve until the group eventually earned the enormous reward promised for their artistic masterpiece.

But these were only dreams.

For now, he was focused on securing that monthly salary from Farid. He had never truly believed their group would get along, let alone create something remarkable.

Bassam lived in a world of his own.

Shadi carried himself as though he were above everyone else.

Farid was a flatterer.

None of them seemed to have anything in common with him.

Then the fortune teller appeared. Her words had affected him deeply. She had strongly hinted that he would die in a certain shop, and he was convinced she had meant every word.

And then there was the message from the restaurant. What was happening?

As if that were not enough, the nightmares kept dragging him back to his mother's grave. That was the worst part of all. What was he supposed to do now? Stay inside the house? Impossible. He had to work, no matter the cost.

So Rawi forced himself out the next morning, constantly glancing over his shoulder, afraid that the fortune teller might be watching him.

The day passed without focus. He earned very little because his employer was dissatisfied with his performance.

After bringing his siblings home, he left again. This time he went directly to the tavern. He ordered a drink and sat staring through the window at the sky. Dark clouds covered it.

Then he noticed something strange. Sami.

It was Sami!

He was walking on top of a tall building. Walking along the edge.

Rawi jumped to his feet in alarm.

Then he witnessed the worst thing imaginable. Sami slipped. And fell. Straight from the rooftop.

Rawi rushed out of the tavern and sprinted toward the building. He searched everywhere. He looked where he expected Sami's body to have landed. Then he climbed the stairs all the way to the roof. But Sami was nowhere to be found.

What should he do now? His heart pounded violently. Had he imagined it? Should he keep searching? Was it simply the alcohol?

He stood there for a long time, struggling to think. Finally, he decided to run home. There was no possible explanation for Sami leaving the house and traveling such a distance alone.

Rawi burst through the front door and entered the bedroom. All three of his siblings were asleep peacefully. And Sami was among them.

Rawi stepped closer, desperate for reassurance. His brother was sleeping soundly. He thanked God and turned to leave the room.

That was when he noticed it.

Around Sami's wrist was a bracelet made of pearls. Rawi was absolutely certain he had never bought it for him. And Sami had not been wearing it when he left school.

So where had it come from?"

I looked at my grandchildren after finishing the sentence. They were listening with complete attention. Then I glanced at the clock and said, “And with that, we have finished speaking about the daily lives of our four heroes. Tomorrow, God willing, we shall continue the exciting story of what happens between them.”



Part Six
Joining Forces

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Second Meeting

Five days had passed since I began telling this story, and now it was the sixth day. How quickly time slips away.

Even though I sat constantly by the window in the bitter cold, wrapped in a rough blanket that offered what little warmth it could, I still felt as though the spirit of youth flowed within me.

Perhaps it sounded amusing, but watching my grandchildren leave for school and return each day made me feel as though my own school days were only yesterday. Sometimes it felt as if I might wake up tomorrow, rise from my bed, put on my school uniform, sling my bag over my shoulder, lace up my shoes, and run eagerly to class.

They probably would not believe that. They might even laugh at the idea that I once attended school myself, or that I took part in countless activities.

My message to my grandchildren is simple: live each day as it comes. A day that passes will never return, so do not allow regret to find a place in your hearts.

Words like these rarely mean much to young people standing at the beginning of life, especially when they come from an old man. Yet today, they are a treasure I wish my own grandfather had given me when I was young.

At last, the long-awaited hour arrived. My grandchildren hurried through their lessons and gathered around me once again, eager to hear what would happen to the four winners.

My youngest granddaughter jumped up and asked, "What about Ihsan? What was his life like?"

I smiled and replied, "We will speak about Ihsan later. For now, it is time for the second meeting.

The four gathered again the following evening, this time at a different restaurant. Farid was the last to arrive. He had been forced to walk because he had become afraid of driving his car.

The other three arrived wearing clothes that did not meet the restaurant's dress requirements, forcing them to leave and search for another place.

That was the least of their troubles.

None of them commented on what had happened, and no one complained. Quietly, they moved to a small, modest restaurant. They sat down and ordered juice.

Not a single word was spoken. Even Farid sat in silence, as still as a bird perched upon his head.

Finally, Bassam broke the silence. 'May I ask a question? It might sound a little nosy.'

Farid looked at him. 'What is it?'

Bassam hesitated before saying, 'What was written on the note you received from the previous restaurant?'

The other three fell silent. They exchanged uneasy glances before Shadi asked, 'Why do you want to know?'

Bassam shook his head. 'Forget it. I was just curious.'

Then Rawi spoke. 'There was something bad written on mine.'

The others remained silent.

At last, Farid gathered enough courage to speak. 'It wasn't an illusion.'

The three of them shuddered at the ominous words.

And for the first time, they truly began to believe that all four of them were trapped in the same nightmare."



Chapter Twenty-Six

What Is Happening?

"My goodness, finally!" my youngest granddaughter exclaimed.

I smiled and said, "It didn't take that long."

"Oh, it did," another replied. "Now it should be easier for them to understand each other."

"Do you think so?" I asked.

One of my granddaughters said, "Are there more problems?"

I continued the story: "The discussion was far from over. Still, the atmosphere had become much more open. Each of them shared everything they could about their encounters with the fortune teller. At the very least, they were now certain that none of them had imagined what was happening.

The four of them began thinking seriously about what was going on, who was behind it, and why.

Farid believed that someone wanted to seize the prize for themselves and was trying to force them to withdraw.

Bassam agreed with Farid.

Shadi, however, thought that everything happening to them was connected to their visit to the fortune teller in the first place, and had nothing to do with the prize at all.

As for Rawi, he believed that the fortune teller intended them harm, whatever her true objective might be.

The most important question remained: who was this fortune teller? She seemed to know them very well, or at least had been watching them closely.

Bassam said he had never noticed any particular person during his experiences. The people around him had been different every time he encountered the fortune teller.

The other three confirmed that they had no idea who she could be either.

They were unable to reach any solid conclusion. The only thing they knew for certain was that they were all trapped in the same mystery.

But what were they supposed to do?

At that moment, the owner of the restaurant personally approached their table. He leaned down and whispered so quietly that no one else could hear: 'Please leave immediately.'

The four men stared at him in surprise. 'Have we caused any trouble?' Farid asked.

The owner repeated his request, sweat beginning to run down his face. 'Please leave at once. We won't charge you anything.'

The four exchanged puzzled looks. 'Is something wrong?' Shadi asked.

At last, the owner lost his composure and said firmly, 'Gentlemen, please. Leave immediately.'

Bassam turned to the others. 'Let's go. Something isn't right.'

The four men left the restaurant, uneasy and confused. They had no idea what had happened.

Once outside, Rawi reproached them. 'We should have pressed him for answers. He knows something.'

Farid shook his head. 'He looked ready to throw us out himself before saying a single word.'

Shadi spoke quietly. 'He's being threatened with death.'

The others stared at him.

Shadi looked back at them and said, 'Can any of you think of another explanation?'

Silence fell over the group.

Had things really reached this point?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

To the University

One of my grandsons asked, "Didn't the four of them suspect that the mysterious university might be behind all this?"

"You've anticipated their thoughts by only a few moments," I replied. "Bassam suggested that they return to the university, since that was where they had first encountered the fortune teller. Perhaps there would be lists of those who attended the celebration, or even records of the participants and the works they had submitted.

But the university had closed its doors. It had not reopened since graduation day, and the strange, silent building had returned to its former state.

The four stood outside the gate, wondering what to do next. 'Perhaps the university has been behind all of this from the beginning,' Farid said.

The others looked at him.

'Maybe they don't want us to win the prize.'

'No one forced them to make such a generous offer,' Shadi replied.

'Perhaps,' said Farid, 'but it was an extraordinarily generous offer.'

None of them could reach any conclusion. 'Let's ask around at the nearby shops,' Bassam suggested. 'Maybe one of them knows a professor.'

It was a weak lead, but it was all they had.

The four split up and went from one shop to another, asking about the professors as though they were clinging to the thinnest thread of hope.

Despite all expectations, a spark of luck finally appeared.

Rawi questioned one of the shopkeepers and discovered that the shopkeeper's son knew where Professor Ihsan lived. He had once delivered a special order to the professor's house.

The news lifted their spirits. They quickly obtained the address and hurried there, hoping to find some useful information. Ihsan had been one of the university's most respected and helpful instructors. If there was any professor they wished to meet, it was him.

The house was modest—a single-story building with a small garden—but it was clean and pleasant.

They rang the bell.

A woman in her late twenties opened the door. Her headscarf was loosely wrapped around her neck, and she carried a beautiful infant girl in her arms.

'Sorry to disturb you,' Bassam said. 'Is Professor Ihsan home?'

'He's at work,' she replied. 'Who are you?'

'His former students,' said Shadi. 'We'd like to see him.'

She looked at them thoughtfully. 'From that university? He left that job. He doesn't teach anymore.'

'We'd like to speak with him about a personal matter,' Farid explained. 'It has nothing to do with music.'

The woman seemed surprised. 'He works in publishing now,' she said.

The four obtained the address and headed to the company where Ihsan worked, puzzled by how far removed the job seemed from music.

Getting permission to enter was not easy, but eventually arrangements were made. Only Shadi was allowed inside.

He found Ihsan seated at a computer, absorbed in his work. The professor looked up in surprise when he saw him. 'Shadi!' he exclaimed warmly, inviting him to sit beside him.

Shadi had a long story to tell, but he could not resist asking his first question. 'Why do you work here?'

Ihsan smiled. 'You mean why don't I work in music?'

Shadi nodded.

'Simply because I don't sell art,' Ihsan replied.

Shadi chose not to pursue the subject. The supervisor already seemed unhappy about the interruption. Instead, Ihsan asked why he had come.

Shadi explained everything that had happened—the fortune teller, the strange incidents, and the growing mystery surrounding the four friends.

Ihsan listened with astonishment. The story sounded almost unbelievable.

'You probably don't believe me,' Shadi said.

'That's not it,' Ihsan replied. 'If anyone else told me this story, I might not believe it. But I trust you. I know you're telling the truth. What I don't understand is how I fit into all of this.'

'We want to know who the fortune teller is,' Shadi said. 'Were there records of the people who attended the graduation celebration?'

'It was an open event,' Ihsan answered. 'Everyone was welcome.'

'But surely there were participant records at such an organized university?'

Ihsan smiled. 'The university was organized. The event wasn't meant to be exclusive. People from everywhere attended—students and outsiders alike.'

'Isn't there any way at all to find a clue?' Shadi asked. 'Perhaps we could speak to the university president?'

Ihsan chuckled. 'The president wouldn't answer that question either. Besides, I've never met the university president.'

Shadi remembered how mysterious the university had always seemed. Even so, he was surprised. 'The professors don't know the president?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'Then at least tell me about another professor. I don't know what else to do except keep asking questions.'

Ihsan laughed, as though Shadi still hadn't understood. 'I don't know any of the other professors either.'

The astonishment on Shadi's face was impossible to miss.

Ihsan leaned back and explained. 'We all met one another only through the university. And don't forget—we used aliases. By pure coincidence, I chose an alias that happened to be my real name. Otherwise, you would never have found me, no matter how hard you searched.'

Shadi stared at him. 'Why go to such lengths to hide your identities?'

'Not only ours,' Ihsan replied. 'Yours as well. Tell me, is Shadi your real name?'

Shadi lowered his head and thought for a moment. 'Yes. It is my real name. I rejected the idea of using an alias too. I like being called by my own name.'

Ihsan smiled. 'Then that's something we have in common. It seems we understand each other. Perhaps that is one of the secrets behind how the teachers and winners are chosen.'"



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Investigation

My youngest granddaughter gasped. "Oh wow! Ihsan!"

One of my grandsons said, "Ihsan wasn't any help at all."

Another added, "What does he mean by saying he doesn't trade in art? He could be famous and rich!"

I replied, "Even though the answer was brief, Shadi understood exactly what Ihsan meant."

Shadi returned to his three companions and told them how secretive the university was. None of the participants knew anything about one another, and there were no records of the names involved in an open exhibition.

Farid immediately asked why Professor Ihsan worked in a profession unrelated to music. Shadi gave the simple answer: 'He doesn't sell his art.'

The three fell silent, but Shadi was now convinced by what he had heard. 'He chose to teach art,' he explained, 'but he refuses to commercialize it. He loves art for its own sake and believes that money corrupts it.'

Rawi frowned. 'What's the point of art if it doesn't earn you money?'

'Perhaps that's something difficult for you to understand,' Shadi replied. 'But I understand Ihsan perfectly.'

Farid looked at him with concern. 'Yet you're still working with us.'

'Yes,' said Shadi, 'until I reach the end of this journey.'

Bassam spoke up. 'And what about the fortune teller?'

The three looked at Shadi. 'He knows nothing about her,' Shadi answered.

Although they had managed to find Ihsan, they had learned nothing about the fortune teller, nor about any other instructor at the university.

What were they supposed to do now?

At last, Farid suggested that they move away from the printing shop and find somewhere quiet to sit and talk.

As usual, Farid chose a restaurant. This time, however, it was a simple place frequented by ordinary people, with nothing that distinguished it from any other small restaurant in the city.

It contained fewer than ten tables. A television mounted on the wall was showing a football match, and roughly ten customers were eating inside.

The four friends sat down, ordered food, and resumed their discussion.

Bassam asked, 'Are we discussing the fortune teller or the project?'

'We need to finish the work and claim the reward,' said Rawi.

Shadi looked at him. 'Are you really capable of working under these circumstances?'

'It seems someone wants to stand in the way of our success,' Rawi replied. 'We shouldn't give them the chance.'

'I agree,' said Farid. 'We've found nothing that leads us to the fortune teller, so there's nothing left to discuss except the project.'

Bassam nodded. 'Then at the very least, we should think about what the project itself should be.'

At that moment, the lights flickered. They went out for a brief second, then came back on.

The four looked around. Nothing unusual had happened. Then they turned toward the television. The football match was gone. In its place appeared the fortune teller's tent—the very tent they all knew so well.

The fortune teller sat before her crystal ball.

The four friends leapt to their feet in alarm.

The camera slowly moved closer and closer to her face. Then she raised a finger and pointed directly at them.

At that exact moment, Farid felt something brushing against his foot. He looked down.

A group of rats was emerging from beneath the table.

The four recoiled in horror as more rats poured into the restaurant. There were dozens of them.

They climbed onto tables and scurried across the floor in plain sight. Yet no one else seemed to notice.

The customers continued eating as though nothing unusual was happening.

The four friends were the only ones who could see the rats.

Without another word, they rushed out of the restaurant.

Behind them, the owner shouted: 'Gentlemen! Your bill! The bill!'

Farid hurried back, his hand trembling as he opened his wallet. He pulled out a handful of cash without even checking the amount, shoved it into the owner's hand, and ran after his friends.”

My grandchildren grimaced as they imagined the scene—rats climbing over tables and crawling across people's food.

I smiled and said,

“And that's enough for today. We'll continue the story tomorrow.”



Part Seven
What To Do?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Anxiety

I slept through a quiet night and woke at dawn to the sound of the call to prayer. Getting up and performing ablution had become exhausting. I wished I had risen more eagerly when I was young.

Was that a wish to regain my youth—the dream that had tempted mankind since the beginning of time? Or was it regret for those days?

Had I fallen short? Would I have done more than I did if I were young again today?

Perhaps I would have strayed even further. Perhaps old age is the stage in which we are spared our own arrogance and reminded of the fate that awaits us all.

None of it was meaningless. Childhood, youth, and even old age—no stage of life had been designed in vain. We all walk the same road. That is perfect justice. The injustice comes only from ourselves.

I looked at my grandchildren, each at a different age. Every one of them dragged themselves reluctantly out of bed for school. Even their parents had to urge them to pray before leaving. I found myself wishing to see one of them pray with enthusiasm and joy.

Why don't they look at me? Why don't they feel what I feel? Why don't they learn before it is too late?

And why was I blaming them? Had I not once had a grandfather of my own? Had I not been exactly like them?

It was not blame—it was love. I wanted them to know what I had not known, to do what I had not done, to become better than I ever was.

At last, I returned to my usual seat. The hours passed in thought and reflection until the familiar evening arrived and my grandchildren gathered around me again, eager to hear more.

"Please, no rats today," one of them said.

"Yes," another added. "You promised us."

I laughed and replied, "I promise. But the four friends are now certain that they cannot continue their work like this. First, they must solve the mystery of the fortune teller."

My grandchildren nodded, and I continued. "So, late that night, the four of them sat on the beach, catching their breath and discussing what had happened. They were the only

ones who had witnessed everything. To everyone else, it was as though nothing unusual had occurred.

'I think the first clue lies in the fortune teller's predictions,' Farid said.

The others fell silent. It was a bold observation, but they all knew that her appearances were closely connected to the futures she had foretold for them.

'She predicted a car accident for you,' Rawi said, 'a heart attack for Bassam, and a death at a wedding for Shadi.'

'And she predicted that you would die in the marketplace,' Bassam replied.

'She knows everything about us,' said Shadi.

'More than that,' Farid said. 'She knows our future.'

'And she keeps chasing us, turning our lives into a nightmare,' Rawi said. 'But why? What does she want?'

The four of them sat in silence. What could they possibly do?

Finally, Farid spoke. 'I still think the university is connected to all of this.'

'You won't get any information from it,' Shadi replied.

'Maybe if we could find more of the teachers, we might learn something,' Bassam suggested.

'I doubt it,' said Shadi. 'And besides, the only professor we know anything about is Ihsan.'

Once again, silence settled over them.

Then Rawi glanced at his watch and saw how late it had become. 'I have to leave,' he said. 'It's getting late, and I need to wake up early tomorrow morning.'

The other three looked at him, thinking it took considerable courage to leave alone. But he had no choice.

'What do you expect us to do?' he said. 'Live together in the same room? I have responsibilities.'

'You're right,' Bassam said. 'But...'

'I don't have time to be afraid,' Rawi interrupted. 'I have to keep moving forward.'

Rawi left, defying every fear of what might happen next. The other three also parted ways, each taking a different road home. Every one of them kept glancing over his shoulder, afraid that some new disaster might strike. Even reaching home no longer felt safe enough."

Chapter Thirty

A Second Time

My grandchildren spoke at once. “Did they make it home?”

I laughed. “They did.”

The children fell silent, clearly disappointed, but I added, “But the story doesn’t end there.”

“What comes next?” they asked eagerly.

“It’s true that the four friends walked through the night with great caution, and each of them reached home without encountering anything suspicious. Yet none of them could sleep. Each lay awake, thinking about what was happening and what might happen in the days ahead.

Rawi checked on his brother Sami the moment he entered the house. Shadi spent the entire journey calling Qamar, simply to stay connected to someone. Farid circled his car, opening every compartment and inspecting every inch of it to make sure nothing was wrong.

As for Bassam... he ate a fatty dinner and went straight to bed.

The following day, Shadi went to the apartment building where Qamar’s father lived. He hoped to grow closer to the man and perhaps convince him to sponsor a grand concert that would introduce his music to an audience worthy of his talent.

He rode the elevator up to the fourth floor and waited for permission to enter.

Looking through a window, he gazed down at the cars parked below. They were beautiful and gleaming. How he wished he owned one of them. Qamar had a car of her own, while he relied on public transportation wherever he went.

As he stood there admiring them, he noticed someone sitting inside one of the vehicles.

It was her. The fortune teller.

There was no doubt about it.

Shadi's heart raced. Had she come for him? Was she planning to harm him? Was she planning to harm Qamar or her father?

He thought for a moment. He was far above the parking lot. Perhaps she had no idea he was there. She was still sitting inside the car and had not stepped out. Could she really be completely unaware of him?

He considered his options. This was a perfect opportunity to discover who she really was. But he was too far away. He couldn't risk running down to the parking area—she might drive away before he arrived.

At last, an idea came to him.

He would call someone to come while he kept watch from above. So, he called Bassam.

Bassam was still asleep at home. Shadi told him that the fortune teller was right in front of him and that he needed to hurry so they could catch her.

Bassam jumped out of bed in alarm, threw on his clothes, and rushed to the location Shadi described.

Fifteen minutes later, he arrived at the parking lot.

Throughout that entire time, Shadi had not taken his eyes off the fortune teller inside the car. His appointment with Qamar's father had already begun, but he apologized and remained where he was, watching.

Bassam entered the parking area with extreme caution. Moving slowly, he kept his phone pressed to his ear, listening to Shadi's instructions from above.

Step by step, he approached the vehicle.

He moved around it from the rear toward the front, careful not to make a sound. Then he looked through the driver's window, expecting to see the fortune teller sitting there.

But the seat was empty.

Bassam walked a little farther around the front of the car. At last he saw it. The fortune teller's robe was hanging on the seat.

There was no one inside.

Bassam immediately told Shadi what he had found. Shadi refused to believe him. He rushed downstairs to see for himself.

Bassam was right.

There was nothing in the car except the robe.

But who had placed it there?

Someone had to be working with the fortune teller."



Chapter Thirty-One

Accident

My grandchildren asked, “Did they find out who owned the car?”

“No,” I replied. “They waited for a long time without any luck, and after they finally left, the car disappeared the very next day.”

One of them said, “It’s keeping a close watch on them.”

“Without a doubt,” I said. “As for Farid, he carefully inspected his own car the following morning and found nothing wrong with it.

He got in and drove toward a luxurious hotel where he planned to spend the day. The hotel sat high on a mountain, and the road leading to it wound steadily uphill. The road was not narrow, but safety barriers lined its edges, warning drivers of the deep valley surrounding the mountainside.

Farid drove slowly. He was naturally cautious because of the steep drop beside him, and unusually cautious because of the fortune teller. He expected something to happen at any moment.

Even so, what happened was beyond anything he could have imagined.

He was driving at a modest speed, and the car ahead of him was moving at roughly the same pace. Then, for some reason he could not understand, the vehicle failed to make a proper turn.

It slammed into the barrier.

Then it broke straight through it and plunged into the valley before his eyes.

Farid stopped his car in panic and stared down into the gorge.

The vehicle lay crushed far below.

Leaving his own car where it was, Farid hurried down the slope on foot, staying alert and wary of every passing vehicle.”



Chapter Thirty-Two

At Work

My grandchildren said, “I don’t think Farid will ever get into a car again.”

I smiled. “Perhaps.”

My youngest granddaughter asked, “What about Rawi?”

I continued, “As for Rawi, he went to work early in the morning. He worked in a large office building where he prepared tea for the employees.

He stepped into the elevator and rode it up to the fifth floor. He was alone. Suddenly, the elevator stopped, but the doors did not open.

Rawi pressed the button to open them, but nothing happened. Then the power inside the elevator went out.

He remained calm and waited to see what would happen. He suspected that the fortune teller might be behind it, but after only a few seconds, the lights came back on and the elevator doors slid open.

Rawi looked down the hallway. Everything seemed perfectly normal. There was no one there. He took a step out of the elevator when he heard the sound of liquid splashing onto the floor behind him.

Rawi turned around. Wine had spilled across the elevator floor.

As he lifted his eyes toward the ceiling to see where it had come from, a horrifying doll descended on strings from above. It was medium-sized, with a single eye and filthy, tangled hair.

The doll stretched out its hand toward Rawi’s face.

Rawi jumped back in alarm and quickly pressed the door button. The elevator doors slammed shut on the doll’s arm, severing it right before his eyes.”

My grandchildren clasped their hands together nervously.

“That,” I told them, “Is what happened to the four friends that day. Tomorrow we’ll continue and find out what comes next.”

My youngest granddaughter said, “Dolls aren’t scary.”

I smiled and replied, “These weren’t the kind of dolls you play with. Don’t worry. Now it’s time for bed—tomorrow is a school day.”



Part Eight
Escalation

Chapter Thirty-Three

Everywhere

Day after day, hour after hour—how quickly time passes!

I try to imagine my grandchildren at the age of eighty. What will they become? In what ways will the years change them? Their faces, their bodies, their health?

I watched my youngest granddaughter as she struggled to dress herself. Tying her shoes seemed impossible—just as it has become impossible for me.

An hour, then two, of staring and wondering, yet it was useless. She is little, and in my eyes, she will remain little forever.

I could not even imagine her as a young woman. Imagining her in old age was completely beyond me.

So that is how it is. They cannot picture such things either, just as they cannot picture me in my youthful days.

At least my youth was once a reality. Their old age belongs to the unseen, known only to Allah, the Most High. So why should I exhaust myself over what He alone has decreed?

I leaned back on the sofa and entrusted their future to their Creator, for He alone is truly compassionate toward them.

When I opened my eyes, I realized I had dozed off until nightfall. My grandchildren had gathered around me and awakened me so I could continue the story.

“Will they meet again?” one of them asked.

“Will they choose another restaurant?” asked another.

“They met at the appointed time,” I said. “As for the location, Farid chose it as usual. This time, it was a luxury hotel.

The four friends gathered, each trembling at what might happen to them that day. Strange events seemed to follow them whether they were alone or together.

They sat in the hotel café and took turns recounting what had happened to them. In the end, they agreed that they had to find a solution to the problem.

Bassam suggested going to the police, but the other three rejected the idea. They argued that the police would never concern themselves with incidents like these, especially since none of them had actually been harmed.

‘We need to find out who she is,’ Rawi said.

The moment those words left his mouth, the fortune teller appeared at a table in the restaurant.

The four men jumped in terror. She was here!

Farid immediately gathered his courage. He lunged at her, grabbed her firmly, and seized the opportunity to rip off her face cloth.

The mask came away. Beneath it was a young man in his twenties.

Several café employees rushed over to rescue him from Farid's grip. The young man was their colleague, a waiter who worked in the restaurant.

'What does this mean?' Shadi demanded.

The employees explained that they had never imagined it would frighten anyone so badly. These robes had recently become popular in the market. People were buying them everywhere, wearing them, and joking around with them.

They offered countless apologies. But the four friends exchanged uneasy glances. Then they looked toward a small shop inside the hotel.

Dozens of masked robes hung on display there.

Every single one of them was a fortune teller's."



Chapter Thirty-Four

The Impossible Mission

One of my grandsons said, "Things have become very difficult for them."

Another granddaughter added, "They won't be able to tell the real fortune teller from the others."

"That's true," I said. "Which meant they had to think more seriously than ever before."

The four friends sat down again, trying to appear calm. But all of them were thinking about the same thing. If they stepped out into the street now, they would probably see dozens of fortune tellers. Only one of them was real.

Could they sleep now?

Could they think of a solution?

Was there even a solution?

Farid said, 'We need to focus. Remember, there is only one real fortune teller. Everything around us now is an illusion, and we can't let it affect us.'

'It won't affect us?' Bassam replied. 'How can you say that? I won't even be able to walk through the streets anymore.'

Rawi nodded. 'He's right. We need to solve this problem right now.'

Shadi looked at him. 'And do you have an idea? Right now?'

Bassam said, 'We break into the university and announce that we're giving up the check and the project.'

'Absolutely not!' Rawi shouted.

Farid said, 'That's exactly what the fortune teller wants, and she's not getting it.'

'If that would solve the problem,' Shadi said, 'then I'm willing to give it up.'

'And how are you supposed to marry Qamar then?' Rawi asked.

Farid raised both hands. 'Enough! Enough! Stop arguing. This isn't helping us at all.'

The four fell silent, their minds boiling with frustration.

What were they supposed to do now?

Bassam said anxiously, 'In moments like this, the fortune teller usually appears.'

Farid glanced around the café. 'There are at least three black robes in this hall alone. Do you think one of them is real?'

The evening grew late. The four remained seated, nervous and watchful, constantly looking around the room and observing the people. Most of them were employees, while only a few visitors had entered wearing robes.

Nothing unusual happened.

The four ate their meal with extreme caution, then stepped outside. There, they found dozens of black robed people moving through the streets.

Even children were gathering around the robed figures with excitement. The four friends could not understand what was so entertaining about such a frightening robe.

What a strange generation.

The children soon scattered across the squares and sidewalks, laughing and running.

But the four noticed something unsettling. The children kept looking at them with strange expressions.

Even the children had become strange.

Rawi could not tolerate the looks any longer. He grabbed a passing boy and asked, 'Is there something wrong with us?'

The child replied, 'The fortune teller said today that the number four is an unlucky number.'"



Chapter Thirty-Five

Suspicious

“My, this has become complicated,” the grandchildren said.

My youngest granddaughter asked, “Who is the real fortune teller?”

The other grandchildren looked at her and said, “That’s what we still don’t know.”

“So, when will we find out?” she asked.

“You’ll find out when the four of them solve their dilemma,” I replied.

Then I continued the story: “This time, the four friends did not separate. None of them dared to go home alone. They decided, at the very least, to walk together until they reached the nearest intersection leading to their homes. They would stay together as a group for as long as possible.

They walked through the dark streets, talking.

After a while, Farid lowered his head in thought and said, ‘You know the fortune teller isn’t after the prize.’

Rawi looked at him. ‘Then what does she want?’

Farid remained silent for a moment.

‘You mean that prediction you talked about before,’ Bassam said.

Farid nodded.

‘No one can predict something like that,’ Shadi said.

But Farid replied, ‘I’ve started to fear my car.’

The other three fell silent. Each of them remembered his own problem.

Then Shadi said, ‘Don’t think I believe I’m going to die at my wedding. A car accident, maybe. But at a wedding?’

‘I don’t know,’ Farid answered.

Shadi laughed. ‘I can’t believe you’re starting to believe her prediction. We only asked her for a prediction for fun.’

A heavy silence followed. They all regretted that moment now.

Finally, Shadi said, ‘As for me, I don’t think her prediction has anything to do with this. She wants the prize.’

The four friends reached the first intersection. Now Shadi had to continue alone. He said goodbye to the others and headed home with steady steps.

As he walked, he came across a man walking with his wife, who was carrying their infant daughter. It was Professor Ihsan.

When Ihsan saw Shadi, he stopped and greeted him warmly.

Shadi was relieved to meet someone he knew. The road felt lonely and unsettling. Since Ihsan's home was nearby, his wife continued on ahead while he stayed behind to speak with Shadi about the recent events.

Shadi held nothing back. He told Ihsan everything that had happened. Ihsan listened and thought quietly. 'Whoever is doing this knows all of you very well,' he said.

'Without a doubt,' Shadi replied.

'But where did this person get all that information?'

'I don't know. Maybe from the university.'

Ihsan shook his head. 'The university may know a great deal about you, but its records are extremely confidential. No one could simply access them.'

'Then where did the information come from?' Shadi asked.

Ihsan said, 'Didn't you tell me that Farid is the one who chooses the meeting place every time?'

Shadi stiffened. In every incident they had experienced, Farid had been the one to choose where they met. Could it be that he was working with the fortune teller? Could he be trying to discourage them from pursuing the prize?

But Ihsan continued. 'And you also said that Bassam was the one who suggested giving up the prize, wasn't he?'

Shadi thought again. That was true. Could Bassam be the one who wanted the prize for himself?

Then Ihsan said, 'And from what you told me, Rawi knows about Qamar. That means he knows far more about you than you realized.'

Shadi felt the situation becoming more and more tangled. After all, Rawi was the one who needed the prize most.

'But the prize is open to everyone,' Shadi said. 'There's no reason the four of us can't win it together.'

'That's reasonable thinking,' Ihsan replied. 'But is greed ever reasonable?'

My grandchildren were astonished. The matter had suddenly become far more complicated.

One of them said, "It never occurred to me that one of the four might be behind all this."

"There is more to tell," I said. "But it has grown late today. God willing, next time we will follow each of the four friends separately and see what happened to them."



Part Nine
Death

Chapter Thirty-Six

Bassam

Death. It had visited so many others and passed me by. It had greeted the poor and shunned me. It had struck the defenceless and left me safe.

Eighty years had gone by without a sign of its arrival.

It is the mistress. It is the one who commands. Above it stands none but the Lord of all worlds.

Is there something frightening in these thoughts of mine?

Perhaps. Yet the young do not fear it as I do, as though it wears a different face for them.

That reckless courage with which the years melted away—can I not reclaim it and stand before death with bravery once more?

What am I afraid of? What can I do now? There is nothing left of life but this chair and this blanket. What is there to lose?

It is fear of the past. Fear of what these hands have earned. Now I count my deeds. Now I wonder on which side of the scale I shall end.

A man like me knows with certainty that his death will come for him here, in this very chair. But what of the others? In what manner will death find them?

I would like my death to come while I sit in the chair from which I tell stories to my grandchildren. It is what I do. It is what I plant. May they one day reap its harvest.

The time came, and my grandchildren hurried in and sat around me, waiting for the story.

I looked at them and asked, “Does it matter to people to know how they are going to die?”

My grandchildren did not know what to say, so I tried to make the question easier. “Would their lives change if they knew how they were going to die?”

“Maybe,” they replied.

“Then let us see what happens to the four in such a situation.

Bassam could not sleep. He left his house and went to the nearest restaurant, where he ordered a plate of grilled chicken.

The restaurant was empty. It was late at night, and there was no one else interested in eating such a meal at that hour.

He began eating greedily, forgetting everything that had happened.

Then a woman carrying an infant entered the restaurant. She walked up to his table and asked for help, begging for a morsel of food so she could feed her child.

Bassam felt sorry for her and cut off a piece of chicken for her. She thanked him and left.

He continued eating.

A young boy entered the restaurant and approached him as well. The boy asked for help, saying that he had not eaten since morning and had nothing to ease his hunger.

Bassam cut off another piece from his plate and gave it to him. The boy thanked him and left.

Bassam glanced at the restaurant workers, wondering why they allowed beggars inside. He found them asleep on the tables, waiting for him to finish so they could close the restaurant.

He returned to his meal.

Then another person entered. This one was unsettling. He was thin, covered in bruises and burns. A foul odour drifted from him, and his face was disfigured by a vicious skin disease.

Bassam was sitting near the entrance and had no choice but to face the man immediately.

The stranger stared at him with bulging eyes, reached toward the plate, and took a piece of chicken.

Bassam could not utter a word. The sight of the man was terrifying.

He tried to stand, but the stranger placed a hand on his shoulder. The hand was heavy and powerful. He forced Bassam back into his seat and continued devouring the food greedily while staring at him.

Summoning all his strength, Bassam pushed the man's hand away and leapt from the table, intending to flee the restaurant. But a waiter stopped him at once and demanded payment.

That was apparently the one situation in which restaurant employees woke up.

Bassam slipped his hand into his pocket. Something suddenly crawled up his arm.

A spider.

It had long legs and was as large as a human hand.

Bassam recoiled in horror, swatted it away with his other hand, and bolted from the restaurant, racing back toward home.”



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Farid

My grandchildren all exclaimed at once, "Eww! That's disgusting!"

My youngest granddaughter protested, "You promised there wouldn't be anything disgusting!"

"I'm sorry," I told her, "But that's what really happened."

Another grandchild said, "You made it up yourself."

I smiled and said, "Well, what happened to Farid wasn't disgusting."

Farid had become reluctant to use his car. Too much had happened to him in recent days, and he was convinced that the fortune teller was following him through it. After all, she had predicted that he would die in that car.

At last, he made up his mind. No matter what happened, he could not stop using his car forever. He had to drive it if he wanted to go anywhere.

He got into the car and set off, filled with anxiety about what might happen. Sweat poured down his face, though nothing unusual occurred.

Then suddenly, without warning, the fortune teller appeared in the back seat.

She was there, reaching a hand toward his face.

The moment Farid sensed her presence and saw that he was trapped inside the car with her, he jumped in terror. He threw open the door and rushed to get out. But when he looked more carefully, he discovered that it was his sister, Sura, pulling off a fortune teller robe and laughing at his terrified reaction.

He stared at her as she laughed and mocked him for being so frightened that he had fled the car. He lost control. He began scolding her furiously. He dragged her out of the vehicle, and after several angry shouts, he started slapping her, unable to stop himself.

Sura began crying and screaming until Fuad arrived. Fuad grabbed his brother and pulled him away from her.

'Have you lost your mind?' he shouted. 'What are you doing?'

But Farid could no longer control his anger. After more shouting and a struggle with his brother, he climbed back into his car and sped away as fast as he could.

He drove to the edge of the valley. There, he stopped the car beside the cliff and stepped out, trembling with agitation.

‘This is the cause of it all,’ he said. ‘This car is my fate.’

He released the brake and pushed the car forward until it plunged into the valley below. He watched as it crashed and was completely wrecked.

For a long moment, he stood staring at it. Then he began to laugh.

When he turned around, he saw the fortune teller standing a few meters away. This time he did not panic. He did not even care. He laughed and said: ‘So it was this car. I’ve gotten rid of it. I was supposed to die in it, wasn’t I?’

But the fortune teller remained silent and motionless.

So, Farid said: ‘That can’t happen in another car, can it?’

She did not move.

His smile faded. ‘Can it?’ he asked again, irritated.

At last, the fortune teller shook her head. No.

Farid felt a crushing wave of disappointment. He dropped to his knees and wept for himself.”



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Shadi

“Poor guy,” was my grandchildren’s immediate reaction.

But my youngest granddaughter asked, “Did he really hit his sister?”

“He lost his temper,” I said. “Her joke was far too much for him.”

Another grandchild asked, “What about Shadi?”

I continued: “That night, thoughts tossed Shadi from one worry to another. He could not sleep. Anxiety had completely taken hold of him. Was it possible that one of them was behind all of this?”

It was one o’clock after midnight, and Shadi was still turning restlessly in bed when his phone chimed with a message.

He opened it and found a text from an unknown sender:

(She is with us. If she matters to you, come to the following address...)

Shadi froze. Who else could it be but Qamar?

He immediately called her phone, but it was switched off.

Without a second thought, he threw on his clothes and rushed to the address.

The place was an abandoned building that had stood empty for years. Its walls were crumbling, and its windows were shattered.

After a brief hesitation, Shadi entered and began calling out loudly enough for anyone upstairs to hear. ‘Qamar! Qamar! Are you here? Can you hear me?’

No one answered.

Yet he knew he was not alone. Someone was watching him.

He headed toward the staircase leading to the second floor. There, he caught sight of a figure dressed in black climbing ahead of him. Rather than chase after the person, Shadi slowed down. He was certain that nothing about this night would end well.

Carefully he climbed the stairs. They were worn and slippery. When he reached the second floor, it felt even more desolate than the first.

Looking around, he realized that a wedding hall had once occupied the space. The chairs were broken, the tables were rotting, and the bride and groom’s throne lay overturned on the floor.

He continued upward quietly. Then he heard footsteps descending rapidly. Startled, he prepared himself for whatever was coming. At last, the figure appeared.

It was Professor Ihsan!

The professor was just as startled to see Shadi. Grabbing him by the arm, Ihsan asked, 'What are you doing here?'

Shadi replied, 'What are you doing here?'

'I received a strange message.'

'So did I.'

Ihsan immediately turned and hurried down the stairs. 'Let's get out of here right now.'

But Shadi stopped him. 'Qamar is here! I can't just leave.'

Ihsan stared at him in surprise. 'Your fiancée is here? That was her voice upstairs.'

The moment Shadi heard those words, he bolted up the staircase, ignoring Ihsan's attempts to stop him.

He raced up the decaying stairs as fast as he could.

He reached the fifth and final floor, then climbed onto the roof. But there was nobody there. He searched every corner of the rooftop for any sign of Qamar.

Nothing.

She was not there. No one was.

Looking down from the roof toward the street, he saw the fortune teller emerging from the building. She walked slowly and heavily. Shadi stared at her.

Suddenly she looked up toward him. He recoiled in shock, but then noticed the bloody knife in her hand.

Shadi immediately ran back down the stairs, shouting, 'Qamar! Qamar!'

He reached the second floor. There, he found Professor Ihsan lying motionless on the ground. His eyes were wide open. Blood poured from his chest and spread across the floor.

Shadi trembled at the sight. Ihsan had been murdered! The fortune teller had done it—there could be no doubt.

As he stepped closer to the body, he heard a voice calling from the first floor. 'Shadi! Shadi!'

It was Qamar.

Shadi rushed downstairs, sweat pouring from him. His heart pounded so hard it felt ready to burst from his chest. The fortune teller had been there. She had killed Ihsan. And now Qamar—

He hurried toward the source of the voice and threw open the door, breathless and drenched in sweat.

There she was. Standing perfectly fine. She looked at him and smiled sweetly. Shadi stared at her. She was not tied up. There was not a scratch on her. No signs of struggle. She looked as though she had been sitting comfortably at home.

Qamar looked at the exhausted and terrified Shadi and said, 'I knew you would come for me.'

'Did she hurt you?' he asked.

Qamar looked confused. 'Hurt me? Of course not. It was only a test to see how much you cared about me. And you scored the highest.'

Shadi stared at her in disbelief. 'Do you mean that?'

But Qamar simply walked out of the room, saying, 'That was fun. Like those princess stories where the prince comes to rescue her.'

Shadi was furious. 'This is not a game. Something serious happened here!'

She looked at him and replied, 'There's nothing serious. It was all just a game.'

A game?

All that fear.

All that panic.

Ihsan.

The fortune teller.

How could she be so careless?

Just then, both Shadi and Qamar heard a commanding voice: 'Don't move! Stay where you are!'

They turned and saw that the police had surrounded the building. Qamar looked astonished. 'Did you call the police?'

'No,' Shadi replied. 'But we're in real trouble.'

The police went up to the second floor and found Ihsan murdered there. Qamar denied having any involvement in the crime. And so, the police arrested Shadi and threw him into jail.”



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Rawi

My grandchildren felt sorry for Shadi, and one of them asked, “What was Qamar doing there?”

Another said, “Was she acting in some movie scene?”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “For now, we will leave Shadi and the terrible shock of what he saw, and talk about Rawi instead.

Rawi returned home and stepped into the living room. Everything was quiet. As always, he liked to check on his siblings before going to bed.

He opened Sami’s bedroom door, but Sami was not there. He must have fallen asleep in his sisters’ room.

Rawi opened the girls’ room and found all three of them lying unconscious on the floor. Around them were bottles of wine, most of them empty. Beside them stood dozens of strange-looking dolls, and faint laughter seemed to be coming from among them.

Rawi trembled at the sight. Could they really have drunk all of that? It could kill them!

He rushed toward his siblings, but at that very moment the dolls exploded, scattering cotton stuffing throughout the room.

The three children did not wake up. They did not react to their brother’s screams as he called their names again and again.

Rawi ran to the telephone to call an ambulance, but the line was dead. Someone had cut the wires.

He heard footsteps moving through the room, yet he could see no one. The dust and floating cotton blocked his vision. Even so, a powerful instinct told him it was the fortune teller.

‘What do you want?’ Rawi shouted. ‘If you have a score to settle, leave my siblings alone!’

No answer came.

‘I’m the one you want!’ he shouted again. ‘Leave my siblings out of this! They have nothing to do with what’s happening!’

Then he heard the voice of a little girl softly humming a sad song. A moment later, the girl began to cry.

Rawi turned in circles, searching for the source of the voice, but there was no one there.

The girl continued humming and crying at the same time. Then she began to laugh. Her laughter grew louder and louder until it finally faded away.

At last, Rawi heard Sami's voice. 'Help me.'

Rawi ran toward the place where he thought Sami was. He reached out, trying to find him, but Sami was gone.

He searched frantically where he had heard the voice, but found nothing.

'Where are you?' Rawi cried.

Instead of Sami, he heard his sister Rasha say, 'We need you.'

Rasha was not where she should have been either.

Then Hanaa's voice echoed through the room. 'You are our only hope.'

Rawi shouted their names over and over.

Gradually, the dust began to settle. The room became clearer.

There was no one there.

He was alone.

Rawi rushed out of the room, calling for his siblings at the top of his lungs. Then he heard Hanaa's voice once more. 'Rawi!'

He ran toward the sound. It was coming from her room. Throwing the door open, he found all three of them waking up from sleep. They had heard him shouting.

Rawi hurried to them, checking each one anxiously. Nothing had happened to them. They were perfectly fine. None of them remembered anything strange at all.

So, what had that been?"

One of my grandchildren said, "The fortune teller never hurts anyone."

I smiled and replied, "Perhaps."

"But Ihsan died," another granddaughter pointed out.

My youngest granddaughter looked disappointed that Ihsan was no longer part of the story.

"That is all for today," I said. "The story will continue."



Part Ten
Investigation

Chapter Forty

At the Police Station

A new morning rose over the city.

It had been a long time since I had met anyone—colleagues, friends, old companions. Where were they now?

When you grow old, your priorities change. My grandchildren had become the people closest to my heart. I hardly remembered my friends anymore. In fact, I sometimes wondered whether some of them were even still alive.

How casually I say that now. Those were people who had shared my entire life. Their company mattered to me. Seeing them comforted me. I spent years beside them. Yet now, everyone had scattered.

What a strange world. What a fleeting life. In one moment, we believe everything around us is important, and in the next, all the scales are completely overturned.

Ages have passed, civilizations have vanished, and still, we imagine that we are the most important thing in existence, the centre around which everything revolves.

If only people knew their true place on the map of history. When I think about it now, I simply say: Praise be to God, who sees us even when history abandons us.

My grandchildren arrived, concerned with nothing but games and fun. Their greatest fears were school exams, and their happiest moments were those filled with carefree laughter.

They gathered around me eagerly, ready to hear more.

My youngest granddaughter said, “I’m very upset with this story.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Everyone is miserable. Strange things keep happening. The four friends are going through terrifying experiences. And on top of all that, Ihsan died.”

One of my grandsons said, “I think the story is exciting. I’m not upset at all.”

She glared at him.

I smiled and said, “Why not wait until the end? Perhaps you’ll find something there to comfort you.”

She agreed reluctantly.

I smiled and continued: “Do you think Shadi was the only one affected by Ihsan’s death? Then think again.

During the investigation, the police discovered that Ihsan had been a teacher at the mysterious university, and that Shadi had been one of its successful graduates. Naturally, they decided to gather everyone connected to that chain of events.

The other three winners, the teachers, and the director.

Since nobody seemed to know anything about the teachers or the director, it was much easier to find the remaining three winners.

The police arrested Bassam, Farid, and Rawi and began questioning them.

‘Professor Ihsan was murdered!’

That was the reaction of each of them when they heard the shocking news.

How?

Where?

Why?

At first, the investigation went no further than that. Then Shadi told them about the fortune teller. The officers laughed at the story and questioned the other three. To their surprise, all of them confirmed Shadi’s account of the fortune teller and the strange acts she had been carrying out.

The police dismissed the entire tale as pure fantasy. The day passed without any meaningful results.

Their families could not reach them, as the police station denied holding any detainees under those names.

At two o’clock in the morning, while Bassam sat scratching an attractive drawing of palm trees and irrigation canals into the floor, he heard a strange sound. Someone had thrown a ring of prison keys into his cell.

He could not see who had done it. The corridor was too dark. But the keys were definitely in his possession.

He hurried to try them one after another until he finally found the one that opened his cell.

Stepping out, he still had no idea who had freed him. Then he noticed that the remaining keys matched the cells of his three friends. He rushed to unlock them.

The others emerged and immediately wondered who had helped them, but this was hardly the time to think about it. They simply needed to get out before someone decided to accuse them all and have them executed together.

Shadi carefully opened the door leading to the police office. To escape, they would have to pass through it. Surely at least one officer would be inside.

They had not discussed what to do if they encountered police. None of them had considered it beforehand. Yet those questions became irrelevant the moment Shadi saw what was waiting in the room.

A police officer hung suspended from a rope in the middle of the office.

Blood dripped from his legs.

He had been hanged.

Shadi looked to the opposite side of the room.

The fortune teller stood there, holding the other end of the rope.

She released it.

The officer's body dropped lifelessly to the floor.

Then she calmly walked out of the room.

The four men stood frozen in shock. The fortune teller was a professional killer.

First Ihsan.

Now the police.

Bassam finally whispered, 'Let's leave before they accuse us of this one too.'

Everyone agreed. They hurried toward the hall leading outside. Then they recoiled in horror at what they found there.

At least five police officers lay dead on the floor. Rawi vomited at the sight. The others noticed something else.

Written across the wall in large letters of blood was a message:

'TO THE UNIVERSITY.'"



Chapter Forty-One

To the University

My grandchildren looked surprised. “The university again?”

But the cleverest among them said, “I knew the university was at the centre of this story.”

“It was,” I replied, “but first they had to discuss whether they should accept such a strange invitation.”

One of my granddaughters asked, “Will they actually go?”

“After a discussion that did not last very long,” I said, “they decided to go. They were willing to face any consequence if it meant putting an end to these nightmares.”

“Why would they go alone?” another granddaughter asked. “They should tell the police.”

Someone else replied, “The police who were killed a few moments ago? The police who will almost certainly accuse them of murder?”

“Exactly,” I said. “That was what the four of them were thinking. The police would never stand by their side. They would have to settle their score with the fortune teller themselves.

The four men headed toward the university with hesitant steps. It was exactly as before—abandoned and unsettling. There was not a single human being in sight. In fact, there was no sign of life at all.

They climbed over the gate and entered.

After walking through the corridors for several minutes, they came across a building with a sign hanging above its entrance.

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS

None of them knew whether it was an old sign or one the fortune teller had placed there to lure them inside. They had little choice but to investigate.

The four entered the building, a place none of them had ever visited before. The main hall was surprisingly clean. The marble floor reflected everything above it, and every decorative piece had been polished to perfection.

This was certainly not an abandoned building. Someone had been there only moments earlier.

The four proceeded cautiously.

Then Shadi discovered a corridor with a sign above it that read:

RAWI

The others soon found corridors bearing their own names as well.

What did it mean?

Apparently, the fortune teller wanted them to separate and follow the corridors assigned to them. But should they really walk into such an obvious trap?

Farid asked, 'Any suggestions?'

Bassam answered simply, 'It's a trap. We stay together.'

'Then which corridor do we enter?' Shadi asked.

'We choose one,' Bassam said. 'Rawi's, for example.'

Rawi immediately realized that whatever lay beyond his corridor would reveal his secret. 'Why mine?' he asked. 'Why not yours?'

Bassam knew perfectly well that his own corridor concealed matters meant only for him. 'Why are you objecting to your corridor in particular?' he replied.

'Stop,' said Shadi. 'We have a leader. We can all enter his corridor.'

Farid smiled awkwardly. Shadi had placed him in a position where refusing would seem suspicious. Even so, Farid said, 'Since I am the leader, I propose that each of us enters his own corridor.'

The other three were startled by the suggestion. Farid explained, 'Each of us has a personal matter to settle with the fortune teller. We have the right to keep our privacy.'

What Farid said made sense. Yet all four knew that separating would leave them dangerously vulnerable. Worse still, Shadi had begun to look at Farid with growing suspicion. Could Farid truly be the one behind all of this?

Rawi finally said, 'No problem. I'll enter my corridor.'

With surprising courage, he stepped through his doorway, leaving the others uncertain.

At last, each of them walked toward the corridor bearing his own name.

One by one, they crossed the thresholds and stepped into their unknown fate.



Chapter Forty-Two

The First Gate

One of my grandsons exclaimed, "This is reckless!"

"They're walking straight to their deaths," said another.

One of my granddaughters asked, "Do you think they would survive on their own?"

"None of them was thinking that way," I replied. "Each of them was more afraid of having his secrets exposed in front of the others."

My eldest grandson frowned.

"If they're ashamed of those secrets, why did they do those things in the first place?"

I smiled. "If only everyone thought that way. Reality is very different."

My youngest granddaughter leaned forward eagerly. "What did they find behind those gates?"

I continued the story. "Bassam entered a long corridor. Every time he reached a door at the end and opened it, he found yet another corridor beyond it. Corridor after corridor, it seemed endless.

Eventually, he spotted a doll lying in the middle of the passageway. It was an ugly toy, carelessly discarded on the floor.

After pausing for a few moments, Bassam continued toward it. Suddenly, he heard a cough. Then the doll stood up and faced him.

Bassam stopped. The doll was about the length of a full arm. It looked filthy, as though no one had ever cared for it.

He had no idea what to do. The doll stood directly in his path, and he would have to pass it to reach the next door.

It remained perfectly still. Bassam cautiously took one step forward. The doll took one step toward him.

That was far from reassuring. What would happen next?

Bassam took another step. The doll moved closer again.

Sweat began pouring down his face. Then he heard the sound of a little girl's laughter coming from the doll. The situation was becoming unbearable.

Bassam froze. The doll began swaying from side to side, as if waiting for him to move.

Ten seconds passed. Then twenty. Bassam did not budge.

Without warning, the doll suddenly leaped toward his face. Bassam lost consciousness instantly.

He regained awareness little by little. The first thing he noticed was the horrible smell. His head throbbed from the impact. He lifted it and found himself inside a dark room where he could barely see farther than an arm's length.

He reached beneath him. He was sitting on something soft, damp, and slightly sticky.

The foul odour was definitely coming from it.

Looking around, he realized the room was filled with rotting meat. The sight made him vomit.

Dim lights began appearing along the walls. Though weak, they made a tremendous difference in the darkness.

Gathering his courage, Bassam stood among the piles of meat and looked around. He saw columns, doors, and windows everywhere.

He was not alone, either. People stood behind the columns. Some stared at him. Others sat with their heads lowered in sadness.

Large iron doors stood nearby, and windows overlooked a moon hidden behind clouds. It was still night. Not much time had passed.

Bassam called out to the people in the room. No one answered. In fact, not a single one of them moved.

He cautiously walked toward a man sitting behind a column and staring at him. Carefully avoiding the heaps of meat, he approached until he was only a few steps away. Then he stopped.

The man was not real. It was merely a painting on the wall.

Bassam looked around in disbelief. There were no columns. Everything was painted. The people, the doors, the windows—every detail had been drawn with astonishing precision and perfect perspective.

The room was actually small and completely sealed. There was no entrance. No exit.

Then he heard a strange sound. A wet, sticky sound. Something squelching and rubbing against itself.

He turned around. The piles of meat were gathering together in the centre of the room. As if they were forming something.

Bassam vomited again. Then a voice behind him shouted: 'Over here!'

He spun around. It was Sumayyah, the university's art instructor.

She was standing inside a narrow passage he had not noticed before, gesturing for him to follow.

Bassam did not hesitate. Whatever was happening in that room, he wanted no part of it. He ran toward her.

Together they passed through the corridor and emerged into a hall inside one of the university buildings.

Bassam leaned against a wall, catching his breath. Sumayyah looked at him and said, 'So they brought you here too.'

'Too?' Bassam asked.

'I don't think we're alone,' she replied. 'Some of the teachers and students are here as well. This university is cursed.'

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'I was asleep at home,' she said. 'Then suddenly I found myself at the university. It's terrifying.'

'Do you know what they want?'

'How would I know?' she replied. 'I don't even know who the university president is. I was blind when I agreed to work here. I should have been suspicious of everything.'

'Everything?'

'The enormous salaries. The dazzling benefits. Everything was fake. There's something very wrong about this place.'

'What do you think it is?' Bassam asked.

She shook her head. 'I can't believe I've started believing all those stories about ghosts and the dead connected to this university. I don't even know what to think anymore.'

Bassam glanced around. It was clear that Sumayyah knew very little. If they were going to survive this nightmare, they would have to find answers together.

Then something occurred to him. 'Do you remember Professor Ihsan?'

'The music teacher?'

'Yes.' Bassam paused. 'He was murdered.'

Sumayyah stared at him. Her eyes widened with shock and fear. 'That's impossible!'

‘The same person who is playing these games with us killed him.’

She placed a hand on her head. ‘I’m never going home again,’ she muttered.

Bassam tried to calm her. The last thing they needed right now was panic. But Sumayyah began crying, lamenting her fate.

Finally, Bassam left her where she was and started exploring the hall. Perhaps he could find a way out of this nightmare.



Chapter Forty-Three

The Second Gate

My grandchildren said, "Each of them will enter a gate connected to their own life."

I looked at my youngest granddaughter and noticed that she was crying. I asked her what was wrong.

"She feels sorry for Ihsan," she said. "He was a wonderful person."

One of my grandsons replied, "She's crying over her bad luck."

I smiled and said, "Perhaps both. Now let me tell you about the second gate, the one Farid entered.

Farid stepped into his own passageway. It was long and steeply inclined, and he had to climb upward. The ascent took time and effort. It was obvious that a corridor like this had been designed for going down, not up.

He paused and looked ahead. Something was hanging in the distance.

Approaching cautiously, he discovered a group of dolls suspended from the wall like bodies on gallows. A black liquid dripped from them.

The sight was disturbing, but Farid had already become accustomed to strange and terrifying things. It no longer shocked him. He pressed himself against the wall and moved forward carefully.

His eyes remained fixed on the dolls as he squeezed past them. He never noticed the hand that suddenly burst through the wall behind him and grabbed him.

Farid lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he found himself in a very dark room, so dark that he could barely see his own hand.

He sat up and felt around. The floor beneath him was metallic, and the air was cold.

At that moment, dozens of lights blazed to life, shining directly at him.

Farid shut his eyes immediately, then slowly opened them again as they adjusted to the brightness.

Finally, he realized that he was standing in the middle of a vast field of vehicles. Cars of every kind were lined up facing him, their headlights fixed upon him.

He remained frozen in place. The cars seemed to be staring at him. He could hear their engines running.

Then they began moving. Slowly. Deliberately. They rolled toward him, forming a tightening circle with Farid at its centre.

There was nowhere to run. Nearly twenty cars were surrounding him, inching closer and closer.

Suddenly, he heard the crash of shattering glass.

He turned toward the sound and saw Professor Diya—the energetic and talented actor.

Diya was wielding an iron rod, smashing the windows of the approaching cars.

Farid stared at him.

‘Over here!’ Diya shouted.

Farid leaped across as many cars as he could while Diya shattered as many windows as possible. Gradually, the vehicles shifted their attention from Farid to Diya.

At last Farid reached him. Diya threw away the iron rod, grabbed Farid’s hand, and the two of them ran together to escape the trap.

Farid noticed that Diya seemed to know where he was going. ‘The corridor that brought me into that room is probably safer than this place,’ Diya explained immediately.

‘What are you doing here?’ Farid asked.

‘I have no idea,’ Diya replied. ‘I was asleep in my house. Then I woke up and found myself here.’

Farid looked at him. ‘Are you the only professor from the university here?’

Diya frowned. ‘The university? Are we in the university?’

It was clear that Diya knew very little about what was happening. There was no time for lengthy explanations. They eventually reached an empty hall and stopped to catch their breath.

Diya immediately began questioning Farid about everything that had happened. So, Farid gave him a brief account of the events that had followed their graduation and the strange wonders—and horrors—brought about by the fortune teller.



Chapter Forty-Four

The Third Gate

“One of the cars almost got him!” one of my grandsons exclaimed.

“Were they going to run him over?” one of my granddaughters asked.

“What matters is that he survived,” another replied.

“Not by much,” I said. “Now let us talk about Shadi.

The gate began with a staircase spiralling downward. Shadi could not tell how far the stairs descended or how long he would have to keep going down.

After a while, he began to hear music. Beautiful music. It drifted upward from below. Was someone playing it, or was it merely a recording?

Shadi stopped. Something was lying on the steps ahead of him. He could not quite make out what it was. It looked like a bundle of cloth.

He approached cautiously and reached out to touch it. The cloth trembled. Shadi pulled his hand back in alarm. The bundle moved. Then a doll raised its head and looked directly into his eyes.

Shadi stepped back. The doll produced a small harp and began to play.

Although Shadi was certain that a doll could not possibly perform with such skill, a sweet and enchanting melody flowed from the instrument.

How could it play like that? There had to be a trick.

He stood frozen, unsure what to do. The music was beautiful, but he could not decide whether the situation was reassuring or far more dangerous than it appeared.

Then, in the middle of the performance, one of the harp strings snapped. The music stopped.

Shadi stared at the doll. The doll lowered its head sadly, mourning the broken string, then sat quietly on the staircase once more. For nearly half a minute it remained motionless.

Finally, Shadi gathered his courage and edged past it to continue his descent. The instant his foot came beside the doll, it lunged forward and seized his leg with surprising strength. A sharp blow struck the back of his head.

Darkness swallowed him.

When he awoke, he had no idea how much time had passed. He was sitting in a chair inside a brightly lit ballroom. The music was now loud. People were dancing. So many people. Laughing, smiling, enjoying themselves.

Where was he? Whose party was this? And what was he doing here?

Shadi rose unsteadily from his chair and looked around. A magnificent orchestra played at one end of the hall. The ballroom itself was breathtaking—more beautiful than any he had ever seen.

He scanned the crowd. Couples filled the floor, dancing together.

Then he saw Qamar. She was there. Dancing with someone.

Shadi pushed through the crowd as fast as he could, but the dancers swallowed her from sight.

He continued forcing his way between them, searching desperately. He even shouted her name, but it was useless. The music was far too loud.

At last, he spotted her again on the other side of the ballroom. This time he saw her partner.

It was Farid.

Heat surged through Shadi's veins. What was Farid doing with his fiancée?

He charged toward them, shoving through the crowd with all his strength. But once again, they vanished.

Shadi searched frantically from side to side. They seemed to have disappeared.

He wandered through the sea of dancers, determined to find them no matter what.

Right.

Left.

Nothing.

Did this party have no end? Would the dancing never stop? Would the music never cease?

This is my corridor. My life. Everyone should stop right now.

Standing in the middle of the ballroom, he shouted at the top of his lungs. 'Stop!'

The entire hall fell silent. Everyone turned to stare at him.

Shadi stood there panting, sweat pouring down his face. The expressions around him slowly changed.

Suspicion.

Annoyance.

Who was this man? Who did he think he was? Why was he ordering them to stop?

As he stood surrounded by the increasingly hostile crowd, he finally caught sight of Qamar and Farid slipping out through an emergency exit.

He immediately ran after them.

Shadi rushed to the door, only to find it firmly shut. He pounded against it repeatedly, but it would not budge. The lock was secure.

Looking for something to force it open, he turned back toward the ballroom. His blood ran cold. Everyone was dancing again. And every single dancer now wore the fortune teller's robe.

Shadi froze. Nearly a hundred fortune tellers danced with one another across the floor.

What was going to happen? What fate awaited him? He backed away until his shoulders touched the door. Or at least, he thought they would.

To his surprise, the door was no longer closed. Instead, it swung open behind him, and he fell flat onto his back.

Beyond it lay an emergency staircase leading both upward and downward.

Where had Qamar gone?

Shadi studied the stairs. There had to be some clue. Some trace. The only thing he found was a faint glimmer from Qamar's dress on the upper staircase. He chose that direction and ran upward.

At the top floor he found a large room lit only by a handful of candles. The light was dim and eerie. At the centre of the room stood a sealed coffin.

Shadi approached it slowly. Deep down, he already knew what he would find inside. Anxiety twisted in his chest. His blood was still boiling. Sweat streamed down his forehead.

He stopped before the coffin, unsure whether he possessed the courage to open it.

Drawing a difficult breath, Shadi lifted the lid. Inside lay exactly who he had expected.

Professor Ihsan.



Chapter Forty-Five

The Fourth Gate

“Oh!” my youngest granddaughter cried. “Ihsan! Ihsan!”

The other grandchildren looked at her with amused expressions. She seemed to hear nothing in the story except Ihsan's name.

I smiled. “Yes, it was Ihsan. He was lying there all alone. But now we'll leave Shadi for a while and turn to Rawi.

Rawi walked into his own passageway. It was a true labyrinth. Every corridor split into more passages, and each of those branched into others. There was no way to tell which path to take, for they all seemed destined to lead to the same end.

Eventually, he reached a small pool blocking the corridor. He would have to cross it. But he could not judge how deep the water was.

He would have to swim.

Rawi feared what might be waiting beneath the surface. His fear proved justified. A small doll floated upon the water. He stood still, watching to see if it would move. It remained motionless, its face submerged beneath the surface.

Rawi cautiously took a single step closer. A faint voice whispered, ‘Help me.’

He knew the voice belonged to the doll. Still, he dared not move any closer. He simply stood there, staring at it.

Then the doll slowly lifted its head from the water and looked directly at him. Its face was dripping wet. Its hair hung in ragged, torn strands. One of its eyes had been pierced. Its appearance was horrifying.

Before Rawi could react, something shoved him violently from behind into the pool. That was the last thing he remembered.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself inside a vast hall. The lighting was dim. The room was filled with tables and chairs. Upon every table stood bottles of the finest and most expensive wines.

The hall was completely empty. Yet drunken laughter echoed from every corner.

He heard glasses clinking together.

He heard drinks being poured.

The place buzzed with life, despite being utterly deserted.

Rawi walked cautiously through the hall, studying the bottles surrounding him. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a bottle rolling across one of the tables. He turned just in time to see it tumble off the edge and shatter on the floor.

It was only the first.

Bottle after bottle began rolling from the tables. Each crashed to the ground, breaking into countless shards. Soon the entire floor was flooded with spilled liquor.

Rawi remained where he was, waiting to see what would happen next. Then he noticed a large wall at the far end of the hall. Dark marks were appearing upon it.

Words.

Letters were writing themselves across the wall in black ink.

‘Once there were four young men,

Each an artist in his own domain.

A lady of vision spoke their fate,

Revealing all that was ordained.

Each shall fall for what he hides;

What is written shall come to pass.

So, it is decreed,

So, they have earned,

Let none argue with their fate.’

Suddenly, the fortune teller stepped out from the shadows of the hall. She was standing very close to Rawi.

He recoiled in terror. Stumbling backward, he slipped on the liquor-soaked floor and crashed down.

He crawled frantically, trying to get away. His hand was slashed by the broken glass scattered across the floor.

But in his panic, he felt no pain. He scrambled to his feet and ran, desperate to put as much distance as possible between himself and the fortune teller.

A doorway appeared before him. He could not tell whether it was the same door through which he had entered. It did not matter. He had no other choice.

He flung it open. Immediately, the ground vanished beneath him. He tumbled into a steep chute that carried him downward until he was thrown into another hall.

This one was almost empty. Only a single table stood at its centre. It was covered with books, pens, and scattered papers. Someone sat behind it, completely absorbed in writing.

The towering stacks of books hid the person's face from Rawi's view.



Chapter Forty-Six

To the End

I paused the story. It had grown much later than usual. My grandchildren immediately protested. "You have to finish it this time! There isn't much left! We won't sleep tonight!"

I smiled. "But you have school tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's a holiday!" they all shouted in unison.

Ah... I no longer keep track of the days. Wednesday feels no different from Friday. Holidays have become like ordinary days. One month melts into the next, one year into another.

Time has lost its meaning.

I feel like someone drifting through outer space, where time dissolves, gravity fades away, and everything once taken for granted no longer exists.

Out there, the planets circle around me. Each carries its own history. Each keeps its own calendar.

But space...

Space has no days. Does that make space any less important? Of course not. It is, after all, what holds every world within it.

My youngest granddaughter took my hand, pulling me back from my thoughts. "Please continue, Grandpa," she said. "We won't go to bed until you finish the story."

The others eagerly nodded in agreement.

I smiled. "Very well.

That was where we had left the four of them, each trapped in a different hall.

Bassam remained with Sumayyah, who was sobbing uncontrollably. As he searched the room for an exit, something caught his eye—a tiny splash of paint near the bottom corner of a wall.

A painter's brushstroke.

There was nothing else like it anywhere in the room. Bassam stepped closer. The mark was green, painted in a spiral.

He reached out and touched it, trying to judge how old the paint was. The floor beneath him instantly gave way. A hidden trapdoor opened, and he plunged straight through it.

Sumayyah cried out, calling his name as she tried to follow him, but the shaft was too deep.

She had no idea where it led.

Farid was speaking with Professor Diya.

Diya suggested that the place might not be safe and that they should search it carefully. Farid looked everywhere for an exit, but found none. Then he heard Diya call out anxiously. 'Farid! Come here!'

Farid hurried toward him. The moment his foot landed on a stone slab in the floor, another hidden door opened beneath him.

He dropped into a deep passage.

Shadi stood before Professor Ihsan's coffin.

He could not bear to look at him for long. Then he noticed a small harp resting between Ihsan's hands.

He reached toward it.

Before his fingers even touched the professor's hand, the floor opened beneath him. He plunged into a spiralling shaft whose end could not be seen.

Rawi approached the desk, trying to see who was writing behind the towering stacks of books.

It was Professor Asad.

Asad looked up and noticed him. Both men stared in surprise. Almost at the same moment, they asked, 'What are you doing here?'

Rawi spoke first. 'What are you doing here?'

'As you can see,' Asad replied calmly, 'I'm writing. What are you doing here?'

Rawi remained silent. Asad looked perfectly relaxed. 'Aren't you being chased?' Rawi finally asked.

'Of course not,' Asad answered. 'I like writing here because the university is so peaceful. It was the perfect place—until you arrived.'

Rawi frowned in confusion. Asad waved dismissively. 'Never mind that. I was looking for a certain date in that book. Open it to page three hundred.'

Rawi obeyed.

He opened the book to page 300. The page was blank. Except for three handwritten words in its centre.

'Watch your step.'

Rawi instinctively looked down. The floor vanished beneath his feet. He fell into a bottomless passage.

Thus, all four of them fell through hidden gates, each descending into the same enormous hall.

They dropped nearly five meters from its ceiling before crashing into a massive mound of sand covering the floor.

Bassam lifted his head and coughed, trying to clear the sand from his mouth. Shadi, Farid, and Rawi did the same.

Then they heard applause. The four men wiped the sand from their eyes. Before them stretched yet another vast hall. One corner was buried beneath the great mound of sand. The opposite side held an elegant sitting area.

At its centre stood an ornate chair, surrounded by flowing curtains, blooming flowers, graceful fountains, and crystal water jars.

Seated upon that chair...

...was the fortune teller.

She applauded warmly, welcoming them for arriving safely.

None of them could move.

They were exhausted, half buried in sand.

A moment later, six more fortune tellers entered the hall, taking their places beside the first, three on either side.

The four friends realized that this was the moment. The moment every mystery would finally be revealed. The moment they would learn their fate.

The fortune teller standing at the far right slowly removed her mask.

It was Professor Sumayya.

Bassam let out a long breath. She had been deceiving him all along.

Next, the fortune teller on the far left lifted off her mask.

Professor Diya.

Farid smiled despite himself. The accomplished actor had fooled him perfectly.

Then the next figure on the right removed a mask.

Professor Asad.

The one beside him on the left followed.

It was...

Farid.

The other three stared at the sand-covered Farid in astonishment. Farid himself was equally stunned. 'Fuad? My twin Brother!'

Fuad smiled back at him.

Then the fortune teller standing immediately to the right of the chair removed her mask.

To everyone's amazement...

Professor Ihsan."

My youngest granddaughter jumped with excitement. "Ihsan! Ihsan!"

The others quickly hushed her so they could hear the rest.

"Yes," I said. "He stood there among them, alive and unharmed.

Then the fortune teller standing to the left of the chair removed her mask.

Shadi could no longer remain seated. He sprang to his feet atop the sand. 'Qamar!'

Yes. She was there as well.

And now only one remained. The first fortune teller. The one who had foretold their dreadful fate. The leader.

The four friends stared as the final mask was removed...

Slowly.

Every breath was held.

Every eye was fixed upon the face beneath it.

Silence filled the hall.

It was...

Walid.

The youngest instructor at the university.

A ten-year-old boy had orchestrated all of this.

It seemed impossible.

Most of them could barely remember him among the university staff.

He stepped down from the chair, leaving behind artificial legs, a long train of fabric trailing across the floor, and a cushion that had made him appear much taller.

He was once again the size of an ordinary ten-year-old.

‘Welcome once again,’ he said to the four winners.

Shock had robbed them of speech.

Walid smiled. ‘Yes, I know you're astonished. But you should know this. None of us intends to harm you.’

Those words finally eased the fear that had haunted them throughout the past several days.

Walid gestured toward Ihsan. ‘I am sorry for everything you've endured,’ Ihsan said. ‘But I imagine you're happy to see that I am still alive.’

‘So, it was all an act?’ Shadi asked.

Ihsan nodded.

‘And the police?’ Farid asked. ‘The prison?’

‘They're all part of our team.’

Walid turned toward Fuad. ‘Well?’ Fuad asked with a grin. ‘Did I surprise you?’

‘Since when have you been plotting against me?’ Farid demanded.

Fuad laughed. Then he peeled away another disguise. Beneath it appeared deep wrinkles and the face of an elderly man. It was Professor Jihad, the oldest member of the faculty.

‘Then... Fuad...’ Farid stammered.

‘At home,’ Jihad replied. ‘He knows nothing.’

Walid motioned toward Qamar. She looked at Shadi. ‘I'm sorry for everything that happened,’ she said. ‘But I think you owe me an apology as well.’

'I never imagined you were working against me,' Shadi replied. 'Since when have you been with them?'

'Since before we met. In fact, ... Since before you even enrolled at the university.'

Shadi sighed. Then she reached up and removed her own mask. It was Dalal, one of the university's youngest instructors.

She pulled away a blonde wig, revealing her real golden hair.

Then she slipped off her special shoes, exposing the height difference that had helped complete the disguise.

'So, ...' Shadi whispered. 'Qamar never existed.'

'I'm sorry to tell you,' Dalal said gently. 'She never existed at all.'

Shadi stood speechless.

Jihad smiled. 'I also played Qamar's father. As you can see... Disguises are my specialty.'

Shadi stared at Dalal. 'That can't be true.'

She lowered her eyes.

Walid spoke. 'For you, Shadi, we chose you long ago. You were a gifted musician with great ambition. Our plans for you had been made long before the university itself was even built.'

Then he turned toward the others. 'Farid impressed every one of us. He earned his place unanimously.'

Rawi was discovered by Asad, who strongly recommended him.

And Bassam...' He looked at him thoughtfully. 'Sumayya believed in you, though the rest of us had our doubts. I never expected much from you.'

'But he's an excellent painter,' Sumayya said.

Walid nodded. 'Yes. Art is the most precious thing we possess. Our goal was to find the greatest art. But more important than the art... was the artist.'

He paced slowly before the four young men, who were still covered in sand. 'Shadi was selfish. Arrogant. Suspicious. He trusted no one. He wanted only to climb over others to reach his ambitions.'

Bassam was greedy. He stuffed himself with unhealthy food without restraint. It was revolting.

Farid was reckless. He believed the world belonged to him. He loved his car, though it brought nothing but harm to others.

And Rawi... The greater his responsibilities became, the deeper he sank into wrongdoing.'

'I'll never go back to that life,' Rawi said immediately.

Walid smiled 'Exactly.'

He returned to his chair and rested his head upon one hand. 'A promise made today can easily be broken tomorrow. That wasn't enough. Our goal was for each of you to abandon those faults forever.'

'We wanted to shape you into extraordinary people,' Ihsan added.

Farid smiled faintly. 'Yet here we are... Sitting in the dirt.'

Walid's voice became firm. 'Never forget. You were created from dust, and to dust you shall return. We are not here to teach pride.'

'So, this was your purpose?' Shadi asked.

'Yes,' Walid replied. 'We want each of you to become an example for others. A role model. The kind of living story that people admire and strive to imitate.'

'So, there isn't really a prize?' Rawi asked. 'No money? This was all just a test?'

'There is money,' Jihad answered. 'In fact, there is an open cheque. We never break our promises. But before you create something truly great... You must become worthy of it.'

The four exchanged silent glances.

Finally, Farid looked at Walid. 'You're their leader. Who are you?'

Every instructor placed a hand over their heart.

Walid answered, 'I am the prince of this land... And its future ruler. I avoid the spotlight and prefer a quiet life. Puppetry is my art. I have devoted my life to it. And art... Art is what I believe in.'

Dalal smiled. 'I design all of his puppets. I also create everyone's costumes... Especially the fortune teller's robes. Fashion design is my specialty. And it is a beautiful art.'

'So...' Bassam said. 'The taxi driver... The man who had the stroke... The filthy beggar...'

'Our team,' Asad replied.

'The frightened restaurant owner... The rats...'

'Our team,' Diya said.

‘The dead girl in the car trunk?’

‘Our team as well,’ Sumayyah answered.

Bassam looked at Walid. ‘So... What do you want from us now, sir?’

‘I ask nothing from you,’ Walid replied. ‘I am only taking the fortune teller out of your lives. You treated fortune telling as though it were harmless. Do you not remember the words of God? Say, (None in the heavens and the earth knows the unseen except Allah, and they do not perceive when they will be resurrected.)’ (Qur'an 27:65)

Rawi answered immediately, ‘We will never seek a fortune teller again.’

Walid smiled. ‘That is something you should have known from the beginning. In any case, life will return to normal. You will go back changed for the better. And each of you will receive a bracelet to wear as a reminder of these days.’

Dalal brought forward a small box. Inside lay four bracelets. Each bore the inscription:

I pledge to be a role model.

‘You won't find another like them anywhere in the world,’ Dalal said proudly. ‘I designed them myself.’

Walid looked at the four friends and smiled. ‘Now... You are ready to create a film unlike any the world has ever seen.’



Chapter Forty-Seven

The Film

My grandchildren asked, “Did they manage to make the film?”

“Yes,” I replied. “They completed it successfully. It became widely popular and, more importantly, brought great benefit to society.”

“And was the story about the open cheque really true?”

“Have you forgotten that Walid was the prince of the country? He paid for every single nail used in making that film. As for the enormous profits, they went to the four friends.”

“What about the professors?”

“Each of them returned to their work, and art remained at the heart of their lives. They were also immensely proud of the successful film created by their students. Never forget that a student's success is also a teacher's success.”

One of my grandchildren asked, “But Grandpa, you never told us how each of them died.”

I smiled. “None of them died the way the fortune teller had predicted. Farid died at the age of fifty after falling down a flight of stairs. Shadi passed away at seventy, peacefully in his sleep. Rawi died at fifty in hospital after suffering from a severe infection. As for Bassam, no one ever knew how he died.”

My grandchildren were puzzled. Why did no one know how Bassam had died?

One of them asked, “Did Farid ever drive again?”

“Yes, but he became a safe and responsible driver.”

“What about Shadi? Did he ever get married?”

“Shadi married, and of course, the wedding passed without incident. Rawi gave up drinking completely, and Bassam learned to control his eating habits.”

My grandchildren seemed satisfied with the ending.

I smiled at them. “And that is how our novel ends. Did you enjoy it?”

“Of course!” they answered together.

“Did you learn any lessons that you can carry with you through life?”

“Of course!”

“Then off to bed.”

My youngest granddaughter asked, “When will we start our next story?”

Her question filled my heart with joy. A deep and indescribable sense of contentment came over me. “I’ll think of a beautiful new story for you tomorrow,” I told her.

They were all delighted and went off to bed.

I remained sitting by the window, thanking God for His blessings.

For every flower.

Every drop of rain.

Every gentle breeze.

For my home.

For my children.

For my grandchildren.

For this quiet moment.

For my story telling.

I thanked Him for all the beautiful days I had lived—from childhood, through youth, and into old age.

I thanked Him for providing for me, for blessing me with such generosity, and for guiding me with wisdom.

Then I looked down at the bracelet around my wrist.

Engraved upon it were the words:

I pledge to be a role model.



Completed, praise be to God