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Prologue

Between your fingers you hold a stone and throw it into flowing water. The effect might not be easy to see. There will be a small ripple where the stone breaks the surface and then a splash, muffled by the rush of the surrounding river. That's all.

Throw a stone into a lake. The effect will be not only visible but also far more lasting. The stone will disrupt the still waters. A circle will form where the stone hit the water, and in a flash that circle will multiply into another, then another. Before long the ripples caused by one plop will expand until they can be felt everywhere along the mirrored surface of the water. Only when the circles reach the shore will they stop and die out.

If a stone hits a river, the river will treat it as yet another commotion in its already tumultuous course. Nothing unusual. Nothing unmanageable.

If a stone hits a lake, however, the lake will never be the same again.

For forty years Ella Rubinstein's life had consisted of still waters—a predictable sequence of habits, needs, and preferences. Though it was monotonous and ordinary in many ways, she had not found it tiresome. During the last twenty years, every wish she had, every person she befriended, and every decision she made was filtered through her marriage. Her husband, David, was a successful dentist who worked hard and made a lot of money. She had always known that they did not connect on any deep level, but connecting emotionally need not be a priority on a married couple's list, she thought especially for a man and a woman who had been married for so long. There were more important things than

passion and love in a marriage, such as understanding, affection, compassion, and that most godlike act a person could perform, forgiveness. Love was secondary to any of these. Unless, that is, one lived in novels or romantic movies, where the protagonists were always larger than life and their love nothing short of legend.

Ella's children topped her list of priorities. They had a beautiful daughter in college, Jeannette, and teenage twins, Orly and Avi. Also, they had a twelve-year-old golden retriever, Spirit, who had been Ella's walking buddy in the mornings and her cheeriest companion ever since he'd been a puppy. Now he was old, overweight, completely deaf, and almost blind; Spirit's time was coming, but Ella preferred to think he would go on forever. Then again, that was how she was. She never confronted the death of anything, be it a habit, a phase, or a marriage, even when the end stood right in front of her, plain and inevitable.

The Rubinsteins lived in Northampton, Massachusetts, in a large Victorian house that needed some renovation but still was splendid, with five bedrooms, three baths, shiny hardwood floors, a three-car garage, French doors, and, best of all, an outdoor Jacuzzi. They had life insurance, car insurance, retirement plans, college savings plans, joint bank accounts, and, in addition to the house they lived in, two enviable apartments: one in Boston, the other in Rhode Island. She and David had worked hard for all this. A big, busy house with children, elegant furniture, and the wafting scent of homemade pies might seem a cliché to some people, but to them it was the picture of an ideal life. They had built their marriage around this shared vision and had attained most, if not all, of their dreams.

On their last Valentine's Day, her husband had given her a heart-shaped diamond pendant and a card that read,

To my dear Ella,

A woman with a quiet manner, a generous heart, and the patience of a saint. Thank you for accepting me as I am. Thank you for being my wife.

Yours,
David

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Ella had never confessed this to David, but reading his card had felt like reading an obituary. *This is what they will write about me when I die*, she had thought. And if they were sincere, they might also add this:

Building her whole life around her husband and children, Ella lacked any survival techniques to help her cope with life's hardships on her own. She was not the type to throw caution to the wind. Even changing her daily coffee brand was a major effort.

All of which is why no one, including Ella, could explain what was going on when she filed for divorce in the fall of 2008 after twenty years of marriage.



But there was a reason: love.

They did not live in the same city. Not even on the same continent. The two of them were not only miles apart but also as different as day and night. Their lifestyles were so dissimilar that it seemed impossible for them to bear each other's presence, never mind fall in love. But it happened. And it happened fast, so fast in fact that Ella had no time to realize what was happening and to be on guard, if one could ever be on guard against love.

Love came to Ella as suddenly and brusquely as if a stone had been hurled from out of nowhere into the tranquil pond of her life.

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Ella

NORTHAMPTON, MAY 17, 2008

Birds were singing outside her kitchen window on that balmy day in spring. Afterward Ella replayed the scene in her mind so many times that, rather than a fragment from the past, it felt like an ongoing moment still happening somewhere out there in the universe.

There they were, sitting around the table, having a late family lunch on a Saturday afternoon. Her husband was filling his plate with fried chicken legs, his favorite food. Avi was playing his knife and fork like drumsticks while his twin, Orly, was trying to calculate how many bites of which food she could eat so as not to ruin her diet of 650 calories a day. Jeannette, who was a freshman at Mount Holyoke College nearby, seemed lost in her thoughts as she spread cream cheese on another slice of bread. Also at the table sat Aunt Esther, who had stopped by to drop off one of her famous marble cakes and then stayed on for lunch. Ella had a lot of work to do afterward, but she was not ready to leave the table just yet. Lately they didn't have too many shared family meals, and she saw this as a golden chance for everyone to reconnect.

"Esther, did Ella give you the good news?" David asked suddenly. "She found a great job."

Though Ella had graduated with a degree in English literature and loved fiction, she hadn't done much in the field after college, other than editing small pieces for women's magazines, attending a few book clubs, and occasionally writing book reviews for local newspapers. That was all. There was a time when she'd aspired to become a prominent book

critic, but then she simply accepted the fact that life had carried her elsewhere, turning her into an industrious housewife with three kids and endless domestic responsibilities.

Not that she complained. Being the mother, the wife, the dog walker, and the housekeeper kept her busy enough. She didn't have to be a breadwinner on top of all these. Though none of her feminist friends from Smith College approved of her choice, she was satisfied to be a stay-at-home mom and grateful that she and her husband could afford it. Besides, she had never abandoned her passion for books and still considered herself a voracious reader.

A few years ago, things had begun to change. The children were growing up, and they made it clear that they didn't need her as much as they once had. Realizing that she had too much time to spare and no one to spend it with, Ella had considered how it might be to find a job. David had encouraged her, but though they kept talking and talking about it, she rarely pursued the opportunities that came her way, and when she did, potential employers were always looking for someone younger or more experienced. Afraid of being rejected over and over, she had simply let the subject drop.

Nevertheless, in May 2008 whatever obstacle had impeded her from finding a job all these years unexpectedly vanished. Two weeks shy of her fortieth birthday, she found herself working for a literary agency based in Boston. It was her husband who found her the job through one of his clients—or perhaps through one of his mistresses.

“Oh, it's no big deal,” Ella rushed to explain now. “I'm only a part-time reader for a literary agent.”

But David seemed determined not to let her think too little of her new job. “Come on, tell them it's a well-known agency,” he urged, nudging her, and when she refused to comply, he heartily agreed with himself. “It's a prestigious place, Esther. You should see the other assistants! Girls and boys fresh out of the best colleges. Ella is the only one going back to work after being a housewife for years. Now, don't be modest.”

Ella wondered if, deep inside, her husband felt guilty about keeping her away from a career, or else about cheating on her—these being the only two explanations she could think of. But why he was now going overboard in his enthusiasm.

Still smiling, David concluded, “This is what I call chutzpah. We’re all proud of her.”

“She is a prize. Always was,” said Aunt Esther in a voice so sentimental that it sounded as if Ella had left the table and was gone for good.

They all gazed at her lovingly. Even Avi didn’t make a cynical remark, and Orly for once seemed to care about something other than her looks. Ella forced herself to appreciate this moment of kindness, but she felt an overwhelming exhaustion that she had never experienced before. She secretly prayed for someone to change the subject.

Jeannette, her older daughter, must have heard the prayer, for she suddenly chimed in, “I have some good news, too.”

All heads turned toward her, faces beaming with expectation.

“Scott and I have decided to get married,” Jeannette announced. “Oh, I know what you guys are going to say! That we haven’t finished college yet and all that, but you’ve got to understand, we both feel ready for the next big move.”

An awkward silence descended upon the kitchen table as the warmth that had canopied them just a moment ago evaporated. Orly and Avi exchanged blank looks, and Aunt Esther froze with her hand tightened around a glass of apple juice. David put his fork aside as if he had no appetite left and squinted at Jeannette with his light brown eyes that were deeply creased with smile lines at the corners. However, right now he was anything but smiling. His mouth had drawn into a pout, as though he had just downed a swig of vinegar.

“Great! I expected you to share my happiness, but I get this cold treatment instead,” Jeannette whined.

“You just said you were getting married,” remarked David as if Jeannette didn’t know what she’d said and needed to be informed.

“Dad, I know it seems a bit too soon, but Scott proposed to me the other day and I’ve already said yes.”

“But why?” asked Ella.

From the way Jeannette looked at her, Ella reckoned, that was not the kind of question her daughter had expected. She would rather have been asked “When?” or “How?” In either case it meant that she could start shopping for her wedding dress. The question “why?” was another matter altogether and had completely caught her off guard.

“Because I love him, I guess.” Jeannette’s tone was slightly condescending.

“Honey, what I meant was, why the rush?” insisted Ella. “Are you pregnant or something?”

Aunt Esther twitched in her chair, her face stern, her anguish visible. She took an antacid tablet from her pocket and started chewing on it.

“I’m going to be an uncle,” Avi said, giggling.

Ella held Jeannette’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You can always tell us the truth. You know that, right? We’ll stand by you no matter what.”

“Mom, will you please stop that?” Jeannette snapped as she pulled her hand away. “This has nothing to do with pregnancy. You’re embarrassing me.”

“I was just trying to help,” Ella responded calmly, calmness being a state she had been lately finding harder and harder to achieve.

“By insulting me, you mean. Apparently the only way you can see Scott and me getting married is me being knocked up! Does it ever occur to you that I might, just might, want to marry this guy because I *love* him? We *have* been dating for eight months now.”

This elicited a scoff from Ella. “Oh, yeah, as if you could tell a man’s character in eight months! Your father and I have been married for almost twenty years, and even *we* can’t claim to know everything about each other. Eight months is nothing in a relationship!”

“It took God only six days to create the entire universe,” said Avi, beaming, but cold stares from everyone at the table forced him back into silence.

Sensing the escalating tension, David, his eyes fixed on his elder daughter, his brow furrowed in thought, interjected, “Honey, what your mom is trying to say is that dating is one thing, marrying is quite another.”

“But, Dad, did you think we would date forever?” Jeannette asked.

Drawing in a deep breath, Ella said, “To be perfectly blunt, we were expecting you to grow out of it. You’re too young to get involved in any serious relationship.”

“You know God only took six days to create the entire universe,” Jeannette said in a voice so flat as to be unrecognizable. “I’m thinking you’re projecting your own

fears onto me. But just because you married so young and had a baby when you were my age, that doesn't mean I'm going to make the same mistake."

Ella blushed crimson as if slapped in the face. From deep within she remembered the difficult pregnancy that had resulted in Jeannette's premature birth. As a baby and then as a toddler, her daughter had drained all of her energy, which was why she had waited six years before getting pregnant again.

"Sweetheart, we were happy for you when you started dating Scott," David said cautiously, trying a different strategy. "He's a nice guy. But who knows what you'll be thinking after graduation? Things might be very different then."

Jeannette gave a small nod that conveyed little more than feigned acquiescence. Then she said, "Is this because Scott isn't Jewish?"

David rolled his eyes in disbelief. He had always taken pride in being an open-minded and cultured father, avoiding negative remarks about race, religion, or gender in the house.

Jeannette, however, seemed relentless. Turning to her mother, she asked, "Can you look me in the eye and tell me you'd still be making the same objections if Scott were a young Jewish man named Aaron?"

Jeannette's voice needled with bitterness and sarcasm, and Ella feared there was more of that welling up inside her daughter.

"Sweetheart, I'll be completely honest with you, even if you might not like it. I know how wonderful it is to be young and in love. Believe me, I do. But to get married to someone from a different background is a big gamble. And as your parents we want to make sure you're doing the right thing."

"And how do you know your right thing is the right thing for me?"

The question threw Ella off a little. She sighed and massaged her forehead, as if on the verge of a migraine.

"I love him, Mom. Does that mean anything to you? Do you remember that word from somewhere? He makes my heart beat faster. I can't live without him."

Ella heard herself chuckle. It was not her intention to make fun of her daughter's feelings, not at all. But the way, probably that her laughing to herself sounded like. For reasons unknown to her, she felt extremely

nervous. She'd had fights with Jeannette before, hundreds of them, but today it felt as though she were quarreling with something else, something bigger.

"Mom, haven't you ever been in love?" Jeannette retorted, a hint of contempt creeping into her tone.

"Oh, give me a break! Stop daydreaming and get real, will you? You're being so . . ." Ella's eyes darted toward the window, hunting for a dramatic word, until finally she came up with ". . . romantic!"

"What's wrong with being romantic?" Jeannette asked, sounding offended.

Really, what was wrong with being romantic? Ella wondered. Since when was she so annoyed by romanticism? Unable to answer the questions tugging at the edges of her mind, she continued all the same. "Come on, honey. Which century are you living in? Just get it in your head, women don't marry the men they fall in love with. When push comes to shove, they choose the guy who'll be a good father and a reliable husband. Love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away."

When she finished talking, Ella turned to her husband. David had clasped his hands in front of him, slowly as if through water, and was looking at her like he'd never seen her before.

"I know why you're doing this," Jeannette said. "You're jealous of my happiness and my youth. You want to make an unhappy housewife out of me. You want me to be you, Mom."

Ella felt a strange, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if she had a giant rock sitting there. Was she an unhappy housewife? A washed-up mom trapped in a failing marriage? Was this how her children saw her? And her husband, too? What about friends and neighbors? Suddenly she had the feeling that everyone around her secretly pitied her, and the suspicion was so painful that she gasped.

"You should apologize to your mom," David said, turning to Jeannette with a frown on his face.

"It's all right. I don't expect an apology," Ella said dejectedly.

Jeannette gave her mother a mock leer. And just like that, she pushed back her chair, threw her napkin aside, and walked out of the kitchen.

After a minute Ella and David either in an unusual act of solidarity with their elder sister or because they'd gotten bored of

all this adult talk. Aunt Esther left next, mumbling some poor excuse while chewing fiercely on her last antacid tablet.

David and Ella remained at the table, an intense awkwardness hanging in the air between them. It pained Ella to have to face this void, which, as they both knew, had nothing to do with Jeannette or any of their children.

David grabbed the fork he had put aside and inspected it for a while. "So should I conclude that you didn't marry the man you loved?"

"Oh, please, that's not what I meant."

"What is it you meant, then?" David said, still talking to the fork. "I thought you were in love with me when we got married."

"I was in love with you," Ella said, but couldn't help adding, "back then."

"So when did you stop loving me?" David asked, deadpan.

Ella looked at her husband in astonishment, like someone who had never seen her reflection before and who now held a mirror to her face. Had she stopped loving him? It was a question she had never asked herself before. She wanted to respond but lacked not so much the will as the words. Deep inside she knew it was the two of them they should be concerned about, not their children. But instead they were doing what they both were best at: letting the days go by, the routine take over, and time run its course of inevitable torpor.

She started to cry, unable to hold back this continuing sadness that had, without her knowledge, become a part of who she was. David turned his anguished face away. They both knew he hated to see her cry just as much as she hated to cry in front of him. Fortunately, the phone rang just then, saving them.

David picked it up. "Hello . . . yes, she's here. Hold on, please."

Ella pulled herself together and spoke up, doing her best to sound in good spirits. "Yes, this is Ella."

"Hi, this is Michelle. Sorry to bother you over the weekend," chirped a young woman's voice. "It's just that yesterday Steve wanted me to check in with you, and I simply forgot. Did you have a chance to start working on the manuscript?"

"Oh." Ella sighed. **Copyrighted Material**

Her first assignment at the literary agency was to read a novel by an

unknown European author. She was then expected to write an extensive report on it.

“Tell him not to worry. I’ve already started reading,” Ella lied. Ambitious and headstrong, Michelle was the kind of person she didn’t want to upset on her first assignment.

“Oh, good! How is it?”

Ella paused, puzzled as to what to say. She didn’t know anything about the manuscript, except that it was a historical novel centered on the life of the famous mystic poet Rumi, who she learned was called “the Shakespeare of the Islamic world.”

“Oh, it’s very . . . *mystical*.” Ella chuckled, hoping to cover with a joke.

But Michelle was all business. “Right,” she said flatly. “Listen, I think you need to get on this. It might take longer than you expect to write a report on a novel like that. . . .”

There was a distant muttering on the phone as Michelle’s voice trailed off. Ella imagined her juggling several tasks simultaneously—checking e-mails, reading a review on one of her authors, taking a bite from her tuna-salad sandwich, and polishing her fingernails—all while talking on the phone.

“Are you still there?” Michelle asked a minute later.

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. Listen, it’s crazy in here. I need to go. Just keep in mind the deadline is in three weeks.”

“I know,” Ella said abruptly, trying to sound more determined. “I’ll make the deadline.”

The truth was, Ella wasn’t sure she wanted to evaluate this manuscript at all. In the beginning she’d been so eager and confident. It had felt thrilling to be the first one to read an unpublished novel by an unknown author and to play however small a role in his fate. But now she wasn’t sure if she could concentrate on a subject as irrelevant to her life as Sufism and a time as distant as the thirteenth century.

Michelle must have detected her hesitation. “Is there a problem?” she asked. When no answer came, she grew insistent. “Listen, you can confide in me.” **Copyrighted Material**

After a bit of silence, Ella decided to tell her the truth.

"It's just that I'm not sure I'm in the right state of mind these days to concentrate on a historical novel. I mean, I'm interested in Rumi and all that, but still, the subject is alien to me. Perhaps you could give me another novel—you know, something I could more easily relate to."

"That's such a skewed approach," said Michelle. "You think you can work better with books you know something about? Not at all! Just because you live in this state, you can't expect to edit only novels that take place in Massachusetts, right?"

"That's not what I meant . . ." Ella said, and immediately realized she had uttered the same sentence too many times this afternoon. She glanced at her husband to see if he, too, had noticed this, but David's expression was hard to decipher.

"Most of the time, we have to read books that have nothing to do with our lives. That's part of our job. Just this week I finished working on a book by an Iranian woman who used to operate a brothel in Tehran and had to flee the country. Should I have told her to send the manuscript to an Iranian agency instead?"

"No, of course not," Ella mumbled, feeling silly and small.

"Isn't connecting people to distant lands and cultures one of the strengths of good literature?"

"Sure it is. Listen, forget what I said. You'll have a report on your desk before the deadline," Ella conceded, hating Michelle for treating her as if she were the dullest person alive and hating herself for allowing this to happen.

"Wonderful, that's the spirit," Michelle concluded in her singsong voice. "Don't get me wrong, but I think you should bear in mind that there are dozens of people out there who would love to have your job. And most of them are almost half your age. That'll keep you motivated."

When Ella hung up the phone, she found David watching her, his face solemn and reserved. He seemed to be waiting for them to pick up where they'd left off. But she didn't feel like mulling over their daughter's future anymore, if that was what they'd been worrying about in the first place.



Later in the day, she was alone in the parlor sitting in her favorite rocking chair, looking at the orangey-red Northampton sunset. The sky felt so

close and open that you could almost touch it. Her brain had gone quiet, as if tired of all the noise swirling inside. This month's credit-card payments, Orly's bad eating habits, Avi's poor grades, Aunt Esther and her sad cakes, her dog Spirit's decaying health, Jeannette's marriage plans, her husband's secret flings, the absence of love in her life . . . One by one, she locked them all in small mental boxes.

In that frame of mind, Ella took the manuscript out of its package and bounced it in her hand, as if weighing it. The title of the novel was written on the cover in indigo ink: *Sweet Blasphemy*.

Ella had been told that nobody knew much about the author—a certain A. Z. Zahara, who lived in Holland. His manuscript had been shipped to the literary agency from Amsterdam with a postcard inside the envelope. On the front of the postcard was a picture of tulip fields in dazzling pinks, yellows, and purples, and on the back a note written in delicate handwriting:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Greetings from Amsterdam. The story I herewith send you takes place in thirteenth-century Konya in Asia Minor. But I sincerely believe that it cuts across countries, cultures, and centuries.

I hope you will have the time to read SWEET BLASPHEMY, a historical, mystical novel on the remarkable bond between Rumi, the best poet and most revered spiritual leader in the history of Islam, and Shams of Tabriz, an unknown, unconventional dervish full of scandals and surprises.

May love be always with you and you always surrounded with love.

A. Z. Zahara

Ella sensed that the postcard had piqued the literary agent's curiosity. But Steve was not a man who had time to read the work of an amateur writer. So he'd handed the package to his assistant, Michelle, who had passed it on to *her* new assistant. This is how *Sweet Blasphemy* ended up in Ella's hands.

Little did she know that this was going to be not just any book, but

the book that changed her life. In the time she was reading it, her life would be rewritten.

Ella turned the first page. There was a note about the writer.

A. Z. Zahara lives in Amsterdam with his books, cats, and turtles when he is not traveling around the world. Sweet Blasphemy is his first novel and most probably his last. He has no intention of becoming a novelist and has written this book purely out of admiration and love for the great philosopher, mystic, and poet Rumi and his beloved sun, Shams of Tabriz.

Her eyes moved down the page to the next line. And there Ella read something that rang strangely familiar:

For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away.

Her jaw dropped as she realized this was the contradiction of the exact sentence she had spoken to her daughter in the kitchen earlier in the day. She stood still for a moment, shivering with the thought that some mysterious force in the universe, or else this writer, whoever he might be, was spying on her. Perhaps he had written this book knowing beforehand what kind of person was going to read it first. This writer had her in mind as his reader. For some reason unbeknownst to her, Ella found the idea both disturbing and exciting.

In many ways the twenty-first century is not that different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the Other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever.

A sudden wind blew in her direction, cool and strong, scattering the leaves on the porch. The beauty of the sunset drifted toward the western horizon, and the air felt dull, joyless.

Because love is the very essence and purpose of life. As Rumi reminds us, it hits everybody, including those who shun love—even those who use the word “romantic” as a sign of disapproval.

Ella was as bowled over as if she had read there, “*Love hits everybody, even a middle-aged housewife in Northampton named Ella Rubinstein.*”

Her gut instinct told her to put the manuscript aside, go into the house, give Michelle a call, and tell her there was no way she could write a report on this novel. Ella turned the page, and started to read.

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Sweet Blasphemy

A Novel

A . Z . Z A H A R A

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Sufi mystics say the secret of the Qur'an lies
in the verse Al-Fatiha,
And the secret of Al-Fatiha lies in
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
And the quintessence of Bismillah is the letter *ba*,
And there is a dot below that letter. . . .
The dot underneath the *B* embodies the entire
universe. . . .

ب

The Mathnawi starts with *B*,
Just like all the chapters in this novel. . . .

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Foreword

Beset with religious clashes, political disputes, and endless power struggles, the thirteenth century was a turbulent period in Anatolia. In the West, the Crusaders, on their way to Jerusalem, occupied and sacked Constantinople, leading to the partition of the Byzantine Empire. In the East, highly disciplined Mongol armies swiftly expanded under the military genius of Genghis Khan. In between, different Turkish tribes fought among themselves while the Byzantines tried to recover their lost land, wealth, and power. It was a time of unprecedented chaos when Christians fought Christians, Christians fought Muslims, and Muslims fought Muslims. Everywhere one turned, there was hostility and anguish and an intense fear of what might happen next.

In the midst of this chaos lived a distinguished Islamic scholar, known as Jalal ad-Din Rumi. Nicknamed Mawlana—“Our Master”—by many, he had thousands of disciples and admirers from all over the region and beyond, and was regarded as a beacon to all Muslims.

In 1244, Rumi met Shams—a wandering dervish with unconventional ways and heretical proclamations. Their encounter altered both their lives. At the same time, it marked the beginning of a solid, unique friendship that Sufis in the centuries to follow likened to the union of two oceans. By meeting this exceptional companion, Rumi was transformed from a mainstream cleric to a committed mystic, passionate poet, advocate of love, and originator of the ecstatic dance of the whirling dervishes, daring to break free of all conventional rules. In an age of deeply embedded bigotries and clashes, he stood for a universal spirituality, opening his doors to people of all backgrounds. Instead of the narrow, warrior-oriented jihad—defined as “the war against infidels” and carried out by many in those

days just as in the present—Rumi stood up for an inner-oriented jihad where the aim was to struggle against and ultimately prevail over one's ego, *nafs*.

Not all people welcomed these ideas, however, just as not all people open their hearts to love. The powerful spiritual bond between Shams and Rumi became the target of rumor, slander, and attack. They were misunderstood, envied, vilified, and ultimately betrayed by those closest to them. Three years after they met, they were tragically separated.

But the story didn't end there.

In truth, there never was an end. Almost eight hundred years later, the spirits of Shams and Rumi are still alive today, whirling amid us somewhere. . . .

The Killer

ALEXANDRIA, NOVEMBER 1252

Beneath dark waters in a well, he is dead now. Yet his eyes follow me wherever I go, bright and imposing, like two dark stars ominously hanging in the sky above. I came to Alexandria hoping that if I traveled far enough, I could escape this piercing memory and stop the wail echoing inside my mind, that very last cry he gave out before his face drained of blood, his eyes bulged out, and his throat closed in an unfinished gasp, the farewell of a stabbed man. The howl of a trapped wolf.

When you kill someone, something from that person passes to you—a sigh, a smell or a gesture. I call it “the curse of the victim.” It clings to your body and seeps into your skin, going all the way into your heart, and thus continues to live within you. People who see me on the street have no way of knowing this, but I carry with me the traces of all the men I have killed. I wear them around my neck like invisible necklaces, feeling their presence against my flesh, tight and heavy. Uncomfortable though it feels, I have gotten used to living with this burden and have accepted it as part of my job. Ever since Cain slew Abel, in every murderer breathes the man he murdered, that much I know. It doesn’t disturb me. Not anymore. But then why was I shaken so badly after that last incident?

Everything was different this time, right from the start. Take the way I found the job, for instance. Or should I say instead the way the job found me? Early in the spring of 1248, I was working for a brothel patron in Konya, a hermaphroditic and thus female-looking man. My task was to

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help her to keep the harlots under control and intimidate the customers who didn't behave.

I remember the day vividly. I was hunting a harlot who had escaped the brothel to find God. She was a beautiful young woman, which sort of broke my heart, because when I caught up with her, I was going to ruin her face so bad that no man would ever want to look at her again. I was this close to catching the stupid woman when I found a mysterious letter on my doorsill. I had never learned how to read, so I took it to the madrasa, where I paid a student to read it for me.

It turned out to be an anonymous letter signed by "a few true believers."

"We have heard from a reliable source where you came from and who you really were," the letter said. "A former member of the Assassins! We also know that after the death of Hassan Sabbah and the incarceration of your leaders, the order is not what it used to be. You came to Konya to escape persecution, and you have been under disguise ever since."

The letter said that my services were urgently needed on a matter of great importance. It assured me that payment would be satisfactory. If interested, I was to appear in a well-known tavern that evening after dark. Once there, I had to sit at the table closest to the window, my back to the door, my head bowed down, and my eyes fixed on the floor. I would soon be joined by the person or persons who would hire me. They were going to give me all the information I needed to know. Neither when they arrived nor as they left, and at no point during our conversation, could I raise my head and look at their faces.

It was a strange letter. But then again, I was used to dealing with the whims of clients. Over the years I had been hired by all sorts of people, and most of them wished to keep their names secret. Experience had taught me that, more often than not, the more strongly a client strived to hide his identity, the closer he happened to be to his victim, but that was none of my business. My task was to kill. Not to inquire into the reasons behind my assignment. Ever since I left Alamut years ago, this had been the life I chose for myself.

I seldom ask questions anyway. Why would I? Most folks I know have at least one person they would get rather upset that they don't do anything about it doesn't necessarily mean they are immune to the desire

to kill. In fact, everyone has it in him to kill someday. People don't get that until it happens to them. They think of themselves as incapable of murder. But it is just a matter of coincidence. Sometimes even a gesture is enough to inflame their tempers. A deliberate misunderstanding, a squabble over nothing, or simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time can bring out a destructive streak in people who are otherwise good and decent fellows. Anyone can kill. But not everyone can kill a stranger in cold blood. That is where I enter the picture.

I did the dirty work of others. Even God recognized the need for someone like me in His holy scheme when He appointed Azrael the Archangel of Death to terminate lives. In this way human beings feared, cursed, and hated the angel while His hands remained clean and His name unblemished. It wasn't fair to the angel. But then again, this world was not known for its justice, was it?

When darkness settled, I went to the tavern. The table by the window happened to be occupied by a scar-faced man who seemed to be in deep sleep. It occurred to me to wake him up and tell him to go somewhere else, but with drunks you never knew how they would react, and I had to be careful not to draw too much attention to myself. So I sat at the next available table, facing the window.

Before long, two men arrived. They sat on either side of me so as not to show their faces. I didn't need to look at them, though, to realize how young they were and how unprepared for the step they were about to take.

"You came highly recommended," said one of them, his tone not so much cautious as apprehensive. "We were told you were the best."

It felt funny, the way he said it, but I suppressed my smile. I noticed they were scared of me, which was a good thing. If they were scared sufficiently, they could not dare to do me wrong.

So I said, "Yes, I am the best. That is why they call me Jackal Head. I have never let my clients down, no matter how hard the task."

"Good." He sighed. "Because this might not be an easy task."

Now the other spoke. "See, there is this man who has made himself too many enemies. Ever since he came to this town, he has brought nothing but trouble. We have warned him several times, but he pays us no attention. If anything, he has become more and more contentious. He leaves us no other option."

It was always the same. Each time the clients tried to explain themselves before we cut a deal, as if my approval could in any way lessen the gravity of what they were about to do.

“I know what you mean. Tell me, who is this person?” I asked.

They seemed reluctant to give me a name, offering vague descriptions instead.

“He is a heretic who has nothing to do with Islam. An unruly man full of sacrilege and blasphemy. A maverick of a dervish.”

As soon as I heard this last word, a creepy feeling spread over my arms. My mind raced. I had killed all sorts of people, young and old, men and women, but a dervish, a man of faith, was not among them. I had my superstitions and didn't want to draw God's wrath upon me, for despite everything I still believed in Him.

“I'm afraid I'm going to have to turn it down. I don't think I want to kill a holy man. Find someone else.”

With that, I stood up to leave. But one of the men grabbed my hand and beseeched, “Wait, please. Your payment will be commensurate with your effort. Whatever your fee is, we are ready to double the price.”

“How about triple?” I asked, convinced that they wouldn't be able to raise the amount that high.

But to my surprise, after a brief hesitation, they both agreed. I sat back in my seat, feeling jittery. With this money I could finally afford the price of a bride and get married and stop fretting over how to make ends meet. Dervish or not, anyone was worth killing for this amount.

How could I know in that moment that I was making the biggest mistake of my life and would spend the rest of my days regretting it? How could I know it would be so hard to kill the dervish and that even long after he was dead, his knifelike gaze would follow me everywhere?

Four years have passed since I stabbed him in that courtyard and dumped his body in a well, waiting to hear the splash that never came. Not a sound. It was as if rather than falling down into the water he fell up toward the sky. I still cannot sleep without having nightmares, and if I look at water, any source of water, for more than a few seconds, a cold horror grips my whole body and I throw up.

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PART ONE

Earth



THE THINGS THAT ARE SOLID,
ABSORBED, AND STILL

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