





**Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author
Sister Souljah and her unforgettable novels**

Midnight and The Meaning of Love

“Before there was a Shannon Holmes, a Vickie Stringer, or a Wahida Clark, there was a woman many consider the Queen of Urban Fiction, Sister Souljah.”

—*Essence*

“The story weaves back and forth from the subways of NYC to overseas in a thrilling adventure with an incredible ending and a wrenching tale of love. . . . This one delivers on all promises. . . . Souljah has done it again.”

—*Ebony*

“Sister Souljah’s best storytelling yet. It is amazingly written, smart, erotic, and still street enough for her fans from Brooklyn to Compton, London to Cairo, São Paulo to Johannesburg to enjoy and devour. . . . There is no character in American literature like *Midnight*. There is no other novel like this one.”

—BlackAmericaWeb.com

“Sister Souljah erases any doubt: She is a writer without peer.”

—EURweb

“Sister Souljah weaves a story of love, redemption, revenge, and success with such force that it is nearly impossible to put the book down.”

—NewsOne

“Souljah’s storytelling is so compelling and vivid that you can hear the vinyl beat of Eric B. & Rakim’s *Eric B. Is President* playing in your mind as you read the opening pages. . . . Simply put, *Midnight and The Meaning of Love* is a love story that will challenge what you think you know about cultures, people, and places.”

—InkBlot Book Review

“Souljah knows how to keep you guessing and turning the page, and her latest offering is no exception.”

—Soul Train

Midnight

“A vibrant, engaging novel.”

—*The Washington Post*

“The story is sparkly and seductive from the jump.”

—*Vibe*

“Sister Souljah is the literary hero of the hip-hop generation.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Fans will enjoy this edgy tale of love and survival led by the provocative lead character.”

—*Ebony*

“Shows the true grit of the New York boroughs, the strength and determination of an immigrant family and how, even in a concrete jungle, a rose can bloom.”

—*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

“Souljah’s sensitive treatment of her protagonist is honest and affecting, with some realistic moments of crisis. . . . [She] has obvious talent and sincere motives.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Hip-hop artist and master storyteller Souljah offers biting social critique on contemporary urban culture tucked inside a love story.”

—Vanessa Bush

The Coldest Winter Ever

"*The Coldest Winter Ever* is a tour de force. . . . As finely tuned to its heroine's voice as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. . . . Riveting stuff, with language so frank it curls your hair."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Winter is nasty, spoiled, and almost unbelievably libidinous, and it's ample evidence of the author's talent that she is also deeply sympathetic."

—*The New Yorker*

"Intriguing. . . . Sister Souljah exhibits a raw and true voice in this cautionary tale. . . . A realistic coming-of-age story."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Real and raw. . . . If a rap song could be a novel, it might resemble Sister Souljah's book. . . . The message is solid and one that we can never stop preaching to our youth—anything that comes too easy or too fast is also too risky."

—*Booklist*

"Souljah adds a new voice to the most marginalized of the marginalized."

—*Black Issues Book Review*

"Winter is . . . as tough as a hollow-point bullet. . . . Her voice is the book's greatest strength."

—*Salon.com*



Also by Sister Souljah

The Coldest Winter Ever

A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story

Life After Death: The Coldest Winter Ever II

Midnight: A Gangster Love Story

A Moment of Silence: Midnight III

No Disrespect



MIDNIGHT
AND
THE MEANING
OF LOVE

SISTER
SOULJAH

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Show Love

Love is a powerful emotion propelled by energy, thought, and action. It can change you and anyone around you who you love. Love needs no announcement, it is visible in the eyes and body and deeds of everyone who loves. If you cannot see love through action, it is not love. It's something else . . .

If an elder loves you, she and he and they will prepare you
to do well in life.

If an elder abuses you, confuses you, misuses you, it's wrong
and it is certainly not love.

Elders who do not love lose their authority and influence
over you because they are corrupt and unable.

It is an elder's job to share wisdom and not conceal it,
destroy it, deny it, or distract you from it.

Here are my jewels to you, the young all around the world
in any and every place no matter the faith or politic.

You are not too young to love.

Intelligence is the ability to solve problems.

Wisdom is experience along with intelligence.

Ignorance is not knowing better.

Evil is knowing better but doing wrong anyway, while
influencing others to do the same.

Vanity is uselessness.

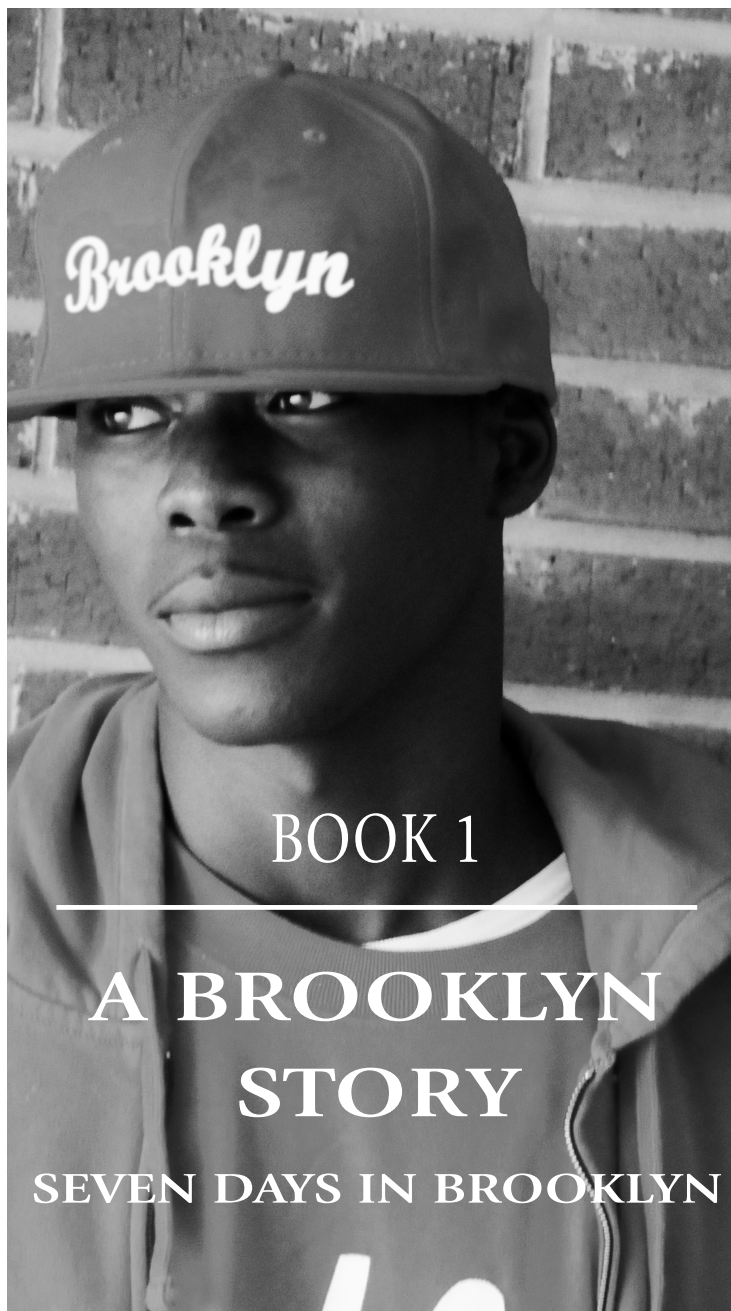
A nigger is any person of any race who refuses
to learn, grow, and change.

Arrogance is thinking and acting like you are better
than others without true or good reason.

Look toward GOD, above every elder, and even your parents and all
of your community. GOD is first, the MAKER of your soul in every
religion and in every corner of the world. GOD is the reason for you
and I to be humble and live respectfully. GOD is love.

Sister Souljah





BOOK 1

A BROOKLYN STORY

SEVEN DAYS IN BROOKLYN



Chapter 1

WORD TO MOTHER

Warmhearted and young, armed and dangerous, I was moving my guns and weapons out of my Brooklyn apartment to one of my most reliable stash spots. As heavy as they were, my thoughts were heavier and even more deadly. I was trying to move murder off my mind.

Kidnapping is a bullshit English word. It doesn't convey the insult that the offense carries, when a man invades another man's home, fucks with his family or his wife, *la kadam Allah* (God forbid), and steals her away.

The man whose wife is gone stands there try'na push the puzzle pieces together of where his wife is exactly and what happened exactly. His blood begins to boil, thicken, curdle, and even starts to choke him. That's why for me, kidnapping and murder go hand in hand.

In my case, my young wife Akemi's kidnapper is her own father, her closest blood relation, a man who she loves and honors. For me to kill him would be to lose her even if I win her back. And I refuse to lose.

Ekhtetaf is our word for kidnapping. My Umma pushed it out from her pretty lips. She pulled it from her soul and gave it the true feeling that it carried for us—the hurt, shame, violation, and insult. For half a day it was all that she said after I relayed to her that Akemi was gone. My new wife had been taken against her will back to Japan without a chance to express herself to us, her new family, face to face.

For me to see my mother Umma's Sudanese eyes filled with tears tripled my trauma. I had dedicated my young life to keeping the water out of my mother's eyes and returning a measure of joy to her heart

that life had somehow stolen. But Sunday night, when our home phone finally rang, and Umma answered only to hear the silence of Akemi's voice and the gasp in Akemi's breathing and the restraint in Akemi's crying, Umma's tears did fall.

There was a furious rainstorm that same Sunday. Everything was soaked, the afternoon sky had blackened and then bled at sunset. So did Umma's eyes switch from sunlight to sadness to rain and eventually redness.

Through the evening thunder I sat still, trying to simmer. They say there is a beast within every man, and I was taming my beast with music. My earplugs were siphoning the sounds of Art of Noise, a soothing song called "Moments of Love."

My sister Naja held her head low. She was responding to our mother Umma's feelings. Like the seven years young that she is, she did not grasp the seriousness of Akemi's disappearance and believed more than Umma and I that Akemi would be coming through the door at any moment.

* * *

Much later that same Sunday night, family day for us, my Umma placed a purple candle in a maroon dish and onto her bedroom floor. She struck a black-tipped match and it blazed up blue. The subtle scent of lavender released into her air. There in the darkness, I sat on her floor, leaning against the wall, and listened to her melodic African voice in the expressive Arabic language, as she told me for the first time ever the story, or should I say saga, of my father's fight to take *her* as his first bride, true love, and true heart. I knew then that the darkness in her room was intentional. She wanted to shield the sea of her emotions since there was no love more intense than the mutual love between her and my father. She also wanted to subdue my fury. She wanted me to concentrate instead on the red and then orange and then blue flame and listen intently for the meaning of her words and the moral of her story so that I would know why I must not fail to bring Akemi back home and why I had to seize victory, the same as my father did.

Monday, May 5th, 1986

At daybreak, when the moon became the sun, Umma's story was completed. She lay gently on the floor still dressed in her fuschia *thobe*. Her hair spread across her arm as she slipped into sleep. Our lives and even our day were both upside down now. I lifted her and placed her onto her bed. I put out the flame that danced on the plate in the middle of mostly melted wax.

Umma was supposed to be preparing for work, but her most important job, which took all night, was finally finished. She wanted to transfer my father's strength and intelligence and brave heart to me, her son. She wanted me to know that I must not be halted by my deep love for her, my mother. She had told me, "You have guarded my life and built our family business. I love you more than you could ever imagine. In my prayers, I thank Allah every day for creating your soul and giving you life. I thank Allah for choosing to send you through my body. But now, *'You must follow the trail of your seed.'*"

Chapter 2

SO IN LOVE

Naja overslept. When I went into her room to wake her for school I found her sleeping in her same clothes from yesterday and clutching a doll. The scene was strange. At night she usually wore her pajamas and her robe and woke up wearing them as well. She didn't play with dolls, wasn't the type, was more into puzzles and pets. As I approached her bed, I saw the doll had the same hair as my wife, long, black, and thick. *That hair is real*, I thought to myself, and reached for the doll. I maneuvered it out of Naja's hands and flipped it around. It was a tan-skinned doll with Japanese eyes drawn on with a heavy permanent black Sharpie marker. The material was sewn and held together with a rough and amateurish stitch.

Naja woke up and said with a sleepy slur and stutter, "I finally made something by myself." She turned sideways in her bed, propping her head up with her hand, and said now with confidence, "It's Akemi. Can't you tell?"

I smiled the way a man with troubles on his mind might smile to protect a child's innocent view of the world. I could've easily got tight with my little sister because she had gone into my room and removed the ponytail of hair that Akemi had chopped off of her own head one day in frustration with her Japanese family.

"It looks like her. You did a good job," I told Naja.

"Do you really think it looks like your wife or are you just saying that to be nice?" Naja asked.

"I'm saying it to be nice. Now get up, you're running late for school today."

* * *

Akemi's expensive collection of high heels was lined up against the wall in our bedroom. Her hand-painted Nikes and other kicks with colorful laces were spread out too. Her luggage and clothing, every dress and each skirt a memory of something sweet, were all there. Her black eyeliner pencil that outlined her already dark and beautiful eyes was left out on the desktop. The perfume elixir that Umma made for Akemi, but truly for my pleasure, was there also. The crystal bottle top was tilted to the right from the last use. Her yoga mat was rolled up and lying in the corner. She had left her diary out for all to see. She knew we could not read one word of the Japanese kanji that began on the last page and ended on the first. Yet she had colorful drawings in there as well. Just then I recalled her fingers gliding down the page with a colored pencil in one hand and a chunk of charcoal in the other.

Everywhere in our bedroom there were signs that this was a woman, a wife who lived here beside me, her husband, and definitely intended to stay. We are teenagers, Akemi and I, but we are both sure of our bond. Furthermore, we took that bold and irreversible step into marriage and our two hearts became one.

She had left her designer life and luxurious apartment behind and moved into the Brooklyn projects to be beside and beneath me. So in love, even in the chaos of this hood, and the glare of the ambulances and scream of their sirens, she could only see me. Each day her love became more sweeter, her smile even brighter.

After hearing Umma's story, I understood now that in the Sudan, my home country, the kidnapping of females is unusual but has happened, especially when two men were battling over the same woman. A Sudanese man will fight hard and by any means necessary to earn the right and advantage over the next man to marry the bride of his choice and make her his own.

Yet our men never battle over a woman after the marriage has already taken place, been witnessed, acknowledged, and agreed on. We never battle to win a woman after her husband has gone into her. And I had gone into my wife Akemi over and over and in so many ways that the thought alone made my heart begin to race and my entire body began to sweat like summer, but in the spring season.

I looked at my bedsheets that I had never thought about before. Umma had selected those sheets knowing that a man wouldn't mind but a woman would. She dressed up my bed one day while I was out. Umma wanted Akemi to feel good and welcomed. I had to admit that those Egyptian cotton sheets were soft and comfortable. Only Akemi's skin was softer.

Eateda is the word from back home that describes for us a bigger offense.

My mind switched to that thought. *Eateda* happens when a kidnapper steals a woman against her will, then rapes her. I promised myself that in my blood relation beef with my wife's father, this was not that type of problem. Yet I also knew that when a man is not beside his woman, protecting, loving, providing, and influencing her all the time, *eateda* is always possible by any man who is allowed to be in the same room with her, if that man is living low.

* * *

My sensei taught me the technique of breathing a certain way to lower the blood pressure and calm the mind and settle the heart. It was not a technique meant to prevent a murder. A man has to think but not too much. Thinking to an extreme can paralyze a man's actions and turn him into a passive coward. What Sensei taught me was a technique meant mainly to calm a warrior to prepare him to make the sharpest, wisest, most effective strike against his target. So I was using it as I stepped swiftly down the subway stairs and out of the spring air. Now it was Monday. My feet were moving rhythmically with my breathing. My game face was neutral, but my soul was scowling. Each time that I cleared my murderous thoughts, they would reappear.

Chapter 3

PRESSURE

I could easily recognize her from behind. As the packed train swerved and jerked, I caught quick glimpses of her pretty neck and shoulders. Her bare arm was extended upward, graceful like a ballerina's, her hands holding the grip lightly like fingers properly placed on piano keys. Seeing nice-looking NY girls was an all-day thing. But it became much more personal when it was a familiar female, someone whose bedroom I had been in before, whose swollen naked nipples I had already seen. A female who had begged me for a kiss and whose infant daughter I had once held in my arms. It was Bangs, and it was a one-in-a-million chance that we would end up on the same train on the same day at the same time, both coming from and going to different places, I was sure.

Immediately, I moved away from her and to my left, my knapsack hitting someone standing next to me. I pushed toward the connecting train doors to switch cars. The train car that I moved into was no better, a very tight crowd. But it was better because they were all strangers. There was no risk or emotion in it for me.

"I saw your reflection on the window glass," Bangs said sweetly, suddenly appearing before me. "I *know* you *knew* it was me. I wanted to see if you would come over by me or not," she said.

I didn't answer her. I didn't move or turn.

The train screeched to a stop. The conductor's voice boomed out something over a broken speaker, it was some ill transit equipment that never got fixed. He knew it didn't work and so did all the passengers. Only he knew what he was announcing. As for the rest of



Bangs

us, you either knew where you were headed or you didn't. This is New York and if there is a problem, it's your problem, handle it.

The train doors opened and some people got off. I was facing the door and Bangs stepped into the now cleared-out space and faced me, looking into my eyes. A new crowd pushed in and now Bangs was pressed close up on me.

It was a warm day and warmer underground. Only the thin silk of her clothes separated me from her. Ever since I met her, it was like this, me not expecting to see her, her suddenly appearing, full of life, skin so pretty, baby oil glistening, and hair cleaned and pulled up into a bun, with bangs framing her eyes. Fourteen years young and already bred, her body was full of obvious curves and power. I tried to step back, but it wasn't happening. There was nowhere to move.

"At least if you see me, you could speak, right, Supastar?" A name she had always called me, a women's way of weakening a man with her nonstop admiration. Her pretty lips were thick and natural, wearing no gloss today. Her eyes were still searching me for answers—that I had already given her a thousand times. It didn't matter to her that I am in love and married to someone else. She would keep pushing like the marathon runner she is. No matter what kind of setbacks occurred, she would slow her pace, catch her breath, reestablish her rhythm and stride, and speed up once again, completely convinced that she could win.

My mind was clear and straight, but even without looking into her eyes, my body was committing mutiny, heating up at the proximity. The train pulled left and then right. She grabbed my waist to stop herself from being tossed here and there. She kept her left hand on my body.

"You don't hafta say nuphin, Supastar. You know you still got my heart," she said softly, yet with bold style. I didn't say nothing in response to her.

"And I'm not worried about it no more because I have a secret about me and you."

I didn't know what the fuck she was talking about. There were no secrets between me and her. There was no saliva, no blood, no sperm or sweat exchanged between us. Okay, maybe some sweat—we had danced pressed together at a party once—but all her secrets were her own. I had told her everything and broke off dealing with her before

anything ever really got started between us. I told her that me and her could never be. I even turned down her offers and resisted my feelings to slide my tongue into her mouth. So she had no claim on me.

“Move, please,” she said to the people blocking her exit at the next stop. As she got off, I wondered exactly where she was coming from, but I shut those thoughts down by reminding myself that she wasn’t my girl, wife, or responsibility. I knew she was surprised by my silence, maybe even hurt. But what was I supposed to do with her if she kept running up on me like this? I liked her, but the sexual feeling that she had swirling around her made me uneasy. It felt like whenever she came around, I had to triple my efforts to ignore and resist.

There was one good thing about knowing her, though. Whenever I was the most tensed up, she would make me smile or loosen up with her ways, and for the few minutes that we rode in the train, she paused my murderous thoughts. Yet the moment she disappeared, I forgot her and they returned.

Chapter 4

RAGE

After I buried the burners, I shot over to the dojo. I knew it might be empty. I wasn't scheduled for a private lesson and there was no class at the time either. I knew that I might be disturbing my teacher on his downtime, but I felt like fighting somebody, striking a jaw, kicking a head off, slamming a rival. So I went.

Sensei drew back the curtain and checked my face through the thick glass window before unlocking the closed dojo door. A serious and mostly silent man whose eyebrows expressed his thoughts, he stood looking at me like a mind reader before clearing the way for me to step inside unannounced.

"Rage is the opposite of thought," Sensei said suddenly. I didn't respond. "Whoever has put you into this frame of mind has more control over you right now, than you have over yourself. If he is your opponent and you will face him today, *you will be defeated*."

I had thought that I had my game face on. I just knew I was looking neutral. Obviously, I was wrong.

"It's not the look on your face. It's your energy: all yang, no yin."

"Excuse me?" I questioned.

"It's all heat coming off of your body. Too much heat for someone so cool." He managed a slight smile with no laughter accompanying it. "Change into your *dogi*," he ordered.

After I suited up, Sensei led me into some unfamiliar movements. They were slow like a strange dance, not the swift and sharp and precise and lethal movements or kata of our caliber and mastery. The movements were so slow that it took a lot of patience for me to execute them. Sensei remained focused and performed the same

movements continuously. He didn't stop, so I didn't either. Twenty or thirty minutes in, I felt myself becoming more calm and comfortable. Sixty minutes total and I was covered with a sheen of sweat and feeling so calm that I could easily ease into a deep sleep.

"*Now* we can begin class," Sensei said, tossing me a white hand towel. I tossed it back and used one of the clean white washcloths I kept in my back pocket throughout the spring and summer season. I wiped my forehead, face, and then neck. He nodded for me to take a seat on the floor and then sat across from me.

I waited for him to introduce the material for today's impromptu private lesson. But still he said nothing. I thought he might be looking for a *suki*, which is what it is called when an opponent is looking for a means of a surprise attack, when a warrior has stupidly left himself open. I leaped back onto my feet, remembering how this sensei had got the better of me in a few encounters. I had told myself that if he attempted to defeat me ever again, I would treat him as an enemy and not as my teacher of seven years and the man who had presided over my wedding, representing my wife and translating her Japanese words, thoughts, and feelings.

"*Yame*," Sensei said, meaning "at ease" or "relax." "*Surwate*," Sensei ordered, meaning "take a seat." He used the Japanese commands that I was accustomed to in our regular group training at the dojo.

"You have something to ask me. I am waiting to hear it," Sensei said with absolute certainty. For seconds I searched my mind. I thought I came to the dojo to fight, but obviously my teacher thought I needed his counsel. I was not the type to confide in any other man. My trust was in Allah, my father, myself, and my Umma. For me there was no one else. I have two best friends, Ameer and Chris, but I still kept most things from them. I'm not a liar, but I am an expert at concealing things.

So now I sat there calmly but unwilling to give up any information about my life, my wife, my war.

"*Now* you are thinking," Sensei observed. "It is so much better than rage."

I listened to Sensei's words but chose to remain silent. If anyone should understand me, it was him, a ninja, a master of ninjutsu the art of invisibility, the man who trained me to be a ninja also. We knew well that ninjutsu stands above all other Asian forms or *do*, meaning

way of life. Ninjutsu is not recreation or sport. It is the supreme art of war, the science of fighting so fiercely and precisely and thoroughly that your enemies are defeated and eliminated and your survival is the only possible outcome.

We sat in silence for ten more minutes before Sensei broke it.

"There are many forms of fighting and fighting happens on many levels. You have been trained most often on a physical level. You have mastered that. You have done very well as a student of weapons also. But there is a form of fighting that happens between thinkers on the thought level." He paused, I guessed to let his words sink into my mind. And I was listening and considering what he was saying. I was even noticing how he was using his mind to maneuver around my silence and make the most accurate predictions about what exactly was going on with me.

"A warrior must know what kind of battle he is going into. If it is physical, we ninjas fight to the finish. We take our enemy down. You know that. But the same way we don't draw our weapons unless we are prepared for the finish, we must know when we are in a battle of another kind." He searched my face for reactions.

"In a thought battle, the superior fighter is the superior thinker. The superior thinker is the warrior with the best plan, someone who has stepped back and measured all the angles. A thinker who has thought about the situation from his enemy's point of view and determined his enemy's thoughts and moves from the beginning to the end. A thinker must have good sentinels, soldiers on his side who gather information and do reconnaissance. Or as a ninja, in an unpredictable situation he must know how to gather information quickly by himself."

"Sensei, let me get it right," I said, interrupting him. "A thought battle would be the type of battle that a fighter is in when he has already decided that murder is not an option, right?"

Sensei's facial expression changed. "We don't speak of murder," he said firmly yet very quietly. "Let us just say that, yes, some battles are not physical, so taking down your opponent is not your objective, but winning *still* is your objective, understand?"

"Of course." I nodded in agreement. After all, this was the kind of battle that I was entering with Akemi's father. And through this conversation with my teacher, I really understood, accepted, and

confirmed that murder was not an option and that this battle was a thought battle. The only part of this battle that was physical was that at the end I had to have my wife back into my hands and living in my presence, not his.

“Then there are spiritual battles. These are the most complex. But to make it simple, let me say that if you are convinced of the truth of your cause, that what you are fighting for is right and true, *then* you will become capable of gaining the confidence you need to have the upper hand over your opponent on a spiritual level. To be certain of your rightness requires some meditation. When you came into the dojo today, you were without meditation. You were only anger. This is why I led you in a session of tai chi, to prepare you to be able to meditate and be certain that you are right in whatever your cause may be. There is always a chance *that you are wrong*. Meditation will reveal this to you.”

I listened intently to what he was suggesting. I wondered for a minute if meditation was really so different from prayer. As a Muslim, I pray throughout the day and night, although I try not to pray at times when my mind is clouded and angry. Fortunately, most of the time my mind *is not* cloudy or angry, just focused.

“Do *you* meditate, Sensei?”

“Only sometimes, when necessary.”

“Because most battles *are* physical?” I asked and stated with confidence. Then a natural smile came across my face. “And in a physical battle, you have no worries, no reason to meditate or hesitate, right, Sensei? And I don’t either.” I held up my fists to emphasize. We both laughed some.

“There, it is good to see your smile,” Sensei reacted. “Your passion and your heart are your assets. The best warriors are passionate and they use the thunder in their hearts to conquer anyone and to overcome any obstacle that threatens their heart.”

I thought about his words for some seconds, and really asked myself if they were true. In the streets, no one says that a man’s passion is good. The streets take passion as a weakness. Niggas work overtime to prove that they are cold, colder, the coldest.

“So *who* has threatened your heart, the heart of a newlywed that should be at ease?” he asked with a half smile mixed with a true concern. Maybe he thought that he had relaxed me so success-

fully that he had eased me into a talkative state. But that wasn't the case.

After a momentary pause, he said with a confident and solemn face, "Allow me to guess. Your opponent, it is your wife's father, Naoko Nakamura, a man who has many enemies but even more friends."

I didn't smile or shift or acknowledge Sensei's guesses in any way. I couldn't tell him that my new wife was gone, stolen away even if it was by her own father's doing. It involved too much pain, insult, and yes, shame. In Sudanese tradition, shame is a heavy burden, like wearing a jacket and pants and a hat and even boots all filled with lead.

"Do you know him, Sensei?" I asked.

"Naoko Nakamura is neither my friend nor my enemy. We are both Japanese. That is all we have in common. He does not know or care that I exist."

"Then why did you bring his name up and speak on it as if you know him?" I asked, unable to shield my general distrust.

"Every Japanese knows him, especially in my age group. He was born on the day that the Americans dropped a two-ton bomb on the Japanese people of Hiroshima and then Nagasaki. After so much death and sorrow, most Japanese people just wanted peace at *any* cost. They welcomed the Americans in and didn't fight the occupation. Not Naoko. He lost his father the day he was born. When he became a very young man, he wanted revenge. He worked relentlessly, was not a physical fighter, but was more clever than a nine-tailed fox. He was a great organizer of men, a real team builder, Japan's extreme patriot, and a masterful businessman, so successful that he became known throughout the Asian continent as "the Man Who Never Surrendered."

I resisted bigging Akemi's father up in my mind despite what Sensei was telling me. They sounded true, Sensei's words, but in order to outmaneuver Naoko Nakamura, I had to view him as just another man, nobody's hero or nothing like that.

So I stood up. "Thank you for today, Sensei. You helped me with my yin-yang." I smiled. "I'll see you in class tomorrow night. Now I gotta go." I turned and headed toward my locker. But he paused me with his words, a final lesson of the day, I figured.

"Scholars have written books about Naoko. He is a very intelligent and accomplished man. When I saw his stamp and signature

on your marriage documents, I thought, 'What are the chances of a young man from Brooklyn marrying the only daughter of this Japanese tycoon and legend?' It seemed impossible. In fact, there was more of a chance of me witnessing a solar eclipse." He smiled.

His words were a strange mixture of him giving me props while at the same time taking them away. After a quick thought, I believed that I figured out what he was really asking me. What were the chances of a talented, rich, and beautiful Japanese teenaged girl like Akemi, who doesn't speak English, marrying a black African like me, living in the Brooklyn projects in a Brooklyn hood, who doesn't speak Japanese? But his question didn't matter to me like it might have mattered to some other black American. I don't have one drop of inferiority in my blood or mind. *I did marry her* and she married me eagerly. It wasn't no mystery. It had happened right before Sensei's eyes in this dojo with his help and many witnesses. I shrugged my shoulders, shaking off the tightness that tried to creep back in.

* * *

I bounced back to my Brooklyn block with only my hands as my weapons. I had no doubt that if anybody tried to test me today, they would receive the full impact of my skill and fury. As soon as I hit my block, I could taste death in the air. There was talk of a kid in the next building who had just gotten slaughtered. First his man was killed. Instead of merking his man's murderer, he snitched to the jake. Two days later, he got to join his man in heaven or hell. I knew there would be a trail of bodies turning up any day, any minute now. Snitching always resulted in a blizzard of blood.

I had moved my guns and *kunai* because of Naja. When she went into my room without my permission and went through my things to find Akemi's ponytail, it meant two things to me. One, it meant that it wasn't her first time going through my things. She was looking for the ponytail that she already knew was there. Two, it meant that she could have easily hurt herself if she came upon one of my burners or tools. Instead of getting more strict with her, I just accepted that she was at an age of being curious. It was easier to move the danger out of her way than to rely on the fact that she wouldn't do it again if I asked her not to. Anyway, I could never forgive myself if I allowed anything bad to happen to my young sister.

Chapter 5

JEWELS FROM MY FATHER

Back in my room I pulled down the blanket that I kept folded and in the top corner of my closet. I unfolded it on my bed and then felt around the hemline. I ripped open the hem carefully and retrieved my three diamonds that Umma had sewn securely into the ragtag blanket. It had been my idea to store the diamonds this way. I thought a safety deposit box at the bank was too accessible to employees and higher-ups, and the diamonds were too valuable to me to risk it. Buying a vault for our apartment was too obvious, because the streets watch you bring it in, then plot all day every day for a way to get it out. Putting diamonds into my mattress or anywhere any criminal would look automatically was dumb.

So I kept the beautiful blankets that Umma crocheted for me on my bed and kept this cheap hospital-issued blanket that Umma had received when Naja was born in the closet. I knew this blanket would never receive a second glance or be stolen by anyone. So it made a perfect decoy. I had planned to store the diamonds there until forever. I had hoped to one day hand these three diamonds to my own son, *inshallah*, the same way that my father had gifted them to me seven years ago. That's how it works with a family heirloom. It is not the same as money a person has inherited or a piggy bank that you go in and out of, or even a savings account that you keep for a while with the intention of spending in the near future. An heirloom is something that gets passed from generation to generation. It is something cherished, the same as these diamonds were, not only because of their value, but because they were lessons from my father. In my lifetime I could work and eventually go and get more diamonds, but they would

not be the same African diamonds that my father gave me in the Sudan, along with his lessons and heart and intentions and instructions. For those reasons alone, they could never be replaced.

But my father did say that the three three-karat diamonds were “three wishes.”

“Use them when everything and everyone else around you fails or when you feel trapped.”

I knew that Naoko Nakamura had me trapped at the moment. But I also knew that I wouldn’t allow him to hold me there for long. I would use at least one of the “three wishes” to go get my wife.

It could be said that my using the diamond was the same as giving the diamond to my son. I was not too young to know that if I had a son in this world, he would be wherever my wife was, resting in the comfort of her womb.

I rode in with Umma. She had to catch the four-to-midnight shift at the Brooklyn textile factory since she’d missed her usual work time slot. We did not talk much. Umma is the kind of woman who doesn’t repeat herself or nag. She knew I understood what must be done, and she would wait to hear my plan and add her thoughts later on. Besides, those midnights when I pick her up from her job are when some of our best ideas and plans are hatched.

After I was sure she was straight at her job, I headed to Manhattan to the Diamond District, to find a reasonable jeweler among thieves to buy at least one of my diamonds. Six was the magic number. I had seen six jewelers by six o’clock, the time when the jewel merchants generally start feverishly packing to leave the heavily guarded area. I was not satisfied with even one of the six negotiations or offers. I knew what my father’s gems were worth. I decided I would come back early the next morning and push until I found the right deal.

That same evening, moving east away from Forty-Seventh and Avenue of the Americas, where many of the jewels from around the world are stored and bought and sold wholesale and retail, I made a left onto Park Avenue. I strolled up the full length of the blocks. I looked around carefully, checking out the discreetly placed hotels that lined that expensive area. They weren’t well-known like the Marriott, Hilton, Hyatt, and Ramada. I liked that. They were more exclusive. Even though their nightly price tag was more than I could afford without cashing in at least one of my diamonds, I had to find the

right location to place Umma and Naja while I was away in Japan. I already knew that I would not leave them alone in the Brooklyn projects. We had only two weeks remaining before we could move into our new house in Queens, which we had bought using the money that we earned together from Umma Designs, our family business. Umma, an incredible seamstress and an expert in fabrics and textiles and designs, had created and sold enough clothing, hats, upholstery, curtains, and so on to bring in eighty thousand dollars over a five-year period. I had managed, marketed, and served as the sales, communication, and delivery person for our company.

Now, even in this crisis, the bottom line was that until I was certain that Umma was safe, I couldn't leave the city. As much as I love my wife in my heart and in my blood and even in my bones, Umma will forever be my first love, my mother, and my purpose.

After a while, I located a place called "The Inn," a small hotel in a four-story brick building on Park. The manager was polite enough to show me a suite without seeming to suspect that I was a criminal, like most small business managers and owners instinctively suspect and treat black males. A brief tour, and I became sure that this place had the right feeling, the right amount of space, and cleanliness, as well as a small kitchen for Umma's use. Immediately outside of the hotel was an upscale deli and a low-key pharmacy.

The hefty price was \$350 per night. When I heard the quote, it made me lean back. Then I regained my composure by guaranteeing myself that I would only be gone for three to five days and that this place would help me feel at ease enough to do whatever I had to do to retrieve my wife.



Chapter 6

SALIM AMED AMIN GHAZZALI

Nightfall came. The New York City lights lit the way for many late-working professionals to escape. Satisfied at how my exit plan was shaping up, I shot over to the Bronx to have a meet-up with Mr. Ghazzali. He had been Umma Designs' best customer. He was Muslim and Sudanese, head of the only Sudanese family besides ourselves that we had come to know in America. The owner of a taxi business, he had enough confidence in Umma's skills to hire her to be the seamstress for his nephew's elaborate Sudanese wedding. After viewing and observing Umma's detailed understanding of Sudanese culture, Mr. Ghazzali hired her to be the wedding planner for the entire event. The ten thousand dollars that we earned from that one wedding is what put us over the top so that we could finally buy a small house in an effort to move out of the Brooklyn projects. He had hired us once, been kind to my mother and family, and paid his debts on time. Now I was gonna hire him to do some simple but important work for me.

When I arrived in the Bronx, I phoned his house from the train station. His phone rang five times, and just as I was about to hang up, I heard the voice of his daughter Sudana.

"Asalaam alaikum."

"Alaikum salaam," I responded. "May I speak with your father, please?"

"You sound tired," Sudana said, surprisingly recognizing my voice. But I should not have been surprised. She was a girl who had kept her eyes on me even when I was not noticing her. While I was working on her family's wedding, I stashed one of my guns at the wedding

venue. She saw me when I was sure no one was looking. She laid back, waited, and removed the gun from a tall ceramic vase, where I had hidden it. She gift wrapped it in a colorful box with a bow as though it were a wedding gift. She handed it to me so politely and casually after the wedding ended. Such a beautiful Sudanese teenaged girl, who I had met after Akemi had already tiptoed into my heart and made herself at home.

"My father isn't in right now," she said regretfully.

"I'm here in the Bronx. I was trying to meet up with him," I said, thinking aloud.

"Where?"

"Down the block, train station."

"Hold on, let me call him because he really should be on his way home," she said eagerly. I heard her calling her father on what I guessed was another phone line.

"My father said you should come on over to our house. He'll meet you here."

"Are your brothers home?" I followed up.

"No," she responded. I paused. If none of the men of her house were home, it was not proper for me to enter their house. This is the Islamic Sudanese way.

"I'm only five minutes away. It sounds like your father will need some more time. So I'll wait and come by a little later," I told her.

"You are so good," she said softly. "But my father has given his permission and you can sit here in his office. Although no one else is home, my mother and sisters and brothers and father will all be here very soon. My father would not be happy if I left you standing around and waiting in the Bronx. So please come by. Is Akemi with you?" she asked softly.

I appreciated the way she always welcomed Akemi even though I could feel her attraction to me. Sudana was always more graceful than envious, unlike the American girls who fight to crush the competition with their tongues and fists and feet.

"Akemi is not with me right now," I answered.

"Oh."

"Thank you, Sudana, I'm coming through." I hung up.

It was a warm night on the hot blocks of the BX. I maneuvered around tight streets where cars were double-parked for as far as my

eyes could see. Some men sat on stoops and others sat on porches. Some men repaired cars while others rushed toward their homes. The ice cream truck, Mister Softee, played his familiar jingle tune, loud enough to rattle the hood and call out the hood rats.

When I arrived at the only house on the block with a high fence, I stopped out front. I pushed the gate, but it was locked, like I knew it would be.

"It's you?" Sudana's voice asked.

"It's me." I heard the lock click twice and the fence opened only enough to let me in. I stepped inside and looked once before lowering my gaze away from Sudana's eyes.

"Come in." She smiled. I locked the fence behind me and followed her in. I didn't have to look directly at her; easily I could just be guided by her scent. Sudanese girls who know and live our traditions wear the most exotic and alluring perfumes, not the same kind that you buy from the department store. They wear handmade ones from centuries ago that merge with each woman's personal chemistry and give her an unforgettable and unique identity. A woman's smell, mixed with the perfumes that we call *kormah* in our Sudanese language, has always been unforgettable to me. I easily understood why we as Muslim men separate ourselves from the presence of women who are not ours. It is the subtle things that a woman does or wears that makes any man aroused if he is allowed to come too close. And every man in the world of any religion or no religion at all knows that he is or can be or will become attracted to many, many women if he is allowed to smell and come in close.

Inside, I removed my Nikes. She bent to remove her sandals. I stopped myself from glancing at her feet.

The inside of the house smelled like cinnamon. Sudana was cooking something, perhaps the meal for her entire family. We walked through the living room, where her school textbook was wide open on the floor, along with a few notebooks, pencils, and a pen. In a small side room with a messy desk, a telephone, and a few file cabinets, papers, and folders, a well-used soccer ball and a soiled old pair of sneakers, she invited me to sit down on a clean cloth couch. I sank in like I was a member of their family sitting in the exact same spot where any one of her brothers had sat repeatedly.

"Wait a minute, please," she said, leaving the room swiftly and leaving her sweet scent behind her.

Thoughts of the past three days of my life raced through my mind. Early Saturday morning was the last time that I had seen my wife's beautiful face and seductive eyes and felt her deep feeling emotions. By Saturday night she was gone. I had spent all day Sunday searching for her and Sunday night sitting with Umma being moved across continents by her true storytelling, which caused me to revisit powerful memories of our Sudanese estate, my phenomenal father, and our relatives, friends, and people. My heart became too heavy for my chest.

"I made this for you," Sudana said, reappearing and carrying a tray and setting it on the desktop. The aroma of the food and her scent revived me. From the corner of my eye I watched her pull out a metal tray with a stand, open it up, and set on it a dish of stew with a cup of tea and *aseeda*.

"You seem like the kind who won't stop to feed yourself unless someone reminds you." She smiled and turned to leave but then stopped and added, "And when you feel tired, you really should go to sleep."

I looked in the ceramic teacup at the unfamiliar way she had placed three tiny yellow flowers in my tea. They rested lightly on top of the hot liquid.

If I'd had the energy, I probably would have said, "No, that's okay, I'm not hungry. I'll wait till later to eat." But Sudana was right. I was hungry and had forgotten to eat so far for the whole day.

She stepped out, then walked right back in carrying a warm cloth, the steam still rising up from it. She came up to me and took my right hand, wiping each finger clean and then turned my palm over and began wiping it with the warm cloth. It felt soothing and the cloth smelled like lemon. I took the cloth from her hand and then used it to clean my other hand for obvious reasons.

"*Shukran*," I said to her, meaning "thank you" in Arabic.

"Enjoy" was all she said, and she turned and left as she was supposed to.

I whispered over the food, "Allah," then took some spoonfuls of the stew. It tasted good and was seasoned well. I couldn't help com-

paring it to my Umma's food, which is always superior. The Sudanese *aseeda* bread was hot the way I liked it. I dipped it in the stew and ate it moist. I gulped the tea, and it entered my body and began calming everything down.

"Now you look a little better." Sudana had returned as I finished. "I mean you're always so handsome, but you seemed too tired today." The fabric of her black *thobe* concealed her flesh and hid her figure. Her *hijab* covered her hair, which I had never seen. She was not wearing *niqab*, so her pretty face, flawless skin—smooth as satin, bearing one black beauty mark, which gently rested over the right side of her lip—stood out more. I avoided those hazel eyes of hers, which tended to change colors, like an African wild cat's. Unexpectedly, she walked up close, stood over me where I was seated, and then placed two fingers on the top of my head. She pressed.

It was a peaceful feeling, this sleep, like how a body rests when it feels at home and in a safe place. But I was not at home. Myself woke myself up. Now the lights in the office were dimmed. The food tray, cloth, and dishes had been removed. I leaned forward and stretched out my legs. I ran my hand over my Caesar haircut, remembering how Sudana had touched my head. It was the last thing I felt before slipping away. I leaped up to my feet with disbelief at my own sloppiness. How could I allow myself to fall asleep in another man's home? I knew I was responsible for the mistake. But I also knew that Sudana had worked some of her Sudanese female charms and tricks on me.

How could I be mad at her when I knew she did it for my own good? I couldn't be. So I just stayed tight at myself.

Across the hall in their bathroom, I threw ice-cold water onto my face and rinsed out my mouth and washed my hands. When I stepped out into the hall, I could hear the sounds of a full house out in their living room.

When I entered the living room, all the female family members began laughing, beginning with the mother. Meanwhile, Mr. Ghazzali and both of his sons suddenly stood up from their seats. A smile forced its way across my face. I was embarrassed.

"My bad, *salaam alaikum*, Mr. Ghazzali and family."

"It's really okay," Mrs. Ghazzali said joyfully. "I tried to call Sana, I mean your *umi* Umma and let her know just how hard she must be

working you, for you to have fallen asleep away from home. But *even she wasn't home*." She smiled.

Sudana brought me a glass of water.

"Yes, Umma is at work tonight. In fact I have to meet her at . . ."

I checked my watch.

"It's ten thirty, brother," Mr. Ghazzali called out.

I drank the water.

"What's happening, man?" Mr. Ghazzali's son Mustapha, asked me.

"Yeah, what's up?" The younger brother Talil greeted me.

"Mr. Ghazzali, I wanted to have a brief business meeting with you. That's why I came by tonight. I hope I haven't inconvenienced you in your home," I said, my way of apologizing.

"Don't insult me. You know that you are welcomed here anytime. I was so impressed with the way you handled your business, I was hoping we could work together again somehow."

"Thank you, Ahki," I said. It was a Sudanese way of acknowledging Mr. Ghazzali as my brother. If my father were standing right there, he would have scolded me to address Mr. Ghazzali as "Amm," or uncle, which is what a young man calls any man who is older than himself by more than a few years.

"Well, good night, gentlemen," Temirah Aunty (Mrs. Ghazzali) said, and three of her daughters followed her out of the living room area. Sudana didn't. She came over to collect the empty glass from me and looked into my eyes like she wanted to say something, but then she didn't. She turned to leave, then looked back and said, 'I mentioned to my *ub* that I saw your wife, Akemi, in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, the Arts & Entertainment section. I'm sure that you've seen it already. I just wanted to say that the kimono she was wearing was incredible. Did Umma make it?' she asked, her eyes filled with curiosity.

"No, Akemi brought the kimono from Japan, and then she designed the outside herself. You know she's an artist."

"Obviously a great one. They only had *her* picture in there for the entire event at the Museum of Modern Art. I guess she overwhelmed them," Sudana said.

"Yes, she overwhelms me too," I said naturally, without thinking about hurting Sudana's feelings. But her face didn't reveal any hurt. I was glad.

"It must be something having a famous wife. I mean, you know Muslim men, and we know that Sudanese men don't prefer to have their wives out in the open, right, Ub?" she asked her father. And before he could even respond, she said to me softly, "I would've worn the veil for you." It was a bold statement for a Sudanese girl, especially in the presence of her father. More than that, it was a polite offer.

"Sudana, let the men talk," Mr. Ghazzali said, dismissing his daughter. She turned and left obediently without a word of protest, as it should be.

* * *

Outside, Mr. Ghazzali sped his taxi in reverse down his driveway, stopping abruptly right before his fence. He waved me into the front seat. I got in. He got out to open the fence. His sons emerged from the dark corner of the yard to lock the fence back up.

"So what's going on?" Mr. Ghazzali asked.

"I have to make a trip to Japan," I told him, getting right into it.

"Whoa! Japan! Sounds nice, but very expensive. You know they say it's the third most expensive country to live in in the world? I had a guy in my cab once telling me a slice of fish out there is eight dollars. They'll slice one fish up ten times. They're selling one medium-sized red snapper for eighty US dollars. If I were living out there, I'd have to turn my whole family vegetarian overnight just trying to make it." He made a sound of disapproval with his teeth that most Sudanese make and understand.

"My Umma and my young sister Naja will stay here in New York. That's what I wanted to discuss. I want to set up car service for them for every morning and every evening while I'm away. I came to you because I need someone I can trust, not just a taxi driver to pick up and drop off."

"You never told me where you and your family are living," he reminded me.

"They'll be staying at a Manhattan hotel while I am away," I said, eluding him.

Mr. Ghazzali maneuvered around the double-parked cars but had to hit the brakes when he reached a triple-parked car. The Impala was in the middle of the street blocking any passage left, right, or straight. There was no driver seated in the vehicle.

"I lost a good driver from the Ivory Coast this way," he said, sitting behind the parked car without honking or cursing. "My driver leaned on his horn on one of these Bronx streets where people park like they're crazy. Some sixteen-year-old kid without a driver's license or insurance ran downstairs and shot him dead for blowing the horn too loud. The kid jumps in the car and speeds away, leaving my driver's bloody body behind. A valuable life lost for no reason. This is what I have been trying to say to you, young brother. You don't need to explain to me what you want out of life or how you want your mother and sister treated. We are Muslim. We are Sudanese. We both understand and want the exact same things. It's these animals out here," he said, pointing to the people lingering on the block. "It's them who don't understand or care. They got no God, no boundaries, no limits, no respect for life."

Just then a man dashed out of the building shirtless, jumped in the car that was blocking us, and peeled off, no acknowledgment or apology, straight New York ghetto style. Mr. Ghazzali waited five seconds and then drove on.

"So you need someone to make sure that your mother and sister are secured. You need a driver who will go inside if he doesn't see them waiting where they are supposed to be, and someone who will not pull off before they get inside safely at night."

"Yes, Ahki," I answered, appreciating not having to exchange too many words about a simple but important plan.

"And the reason they are staying in a hotel instead of with their new friends is—?" he asked, checking my face and quickly moving his eyes back to the road.

"I don't want to burden you with my family. I just wanted to hire your car service because I would feel more comfortable knowing and trusting the person who is transporting my mother and sister. I can pay for the whole thing in advance. I don't know exactly how many days I will be gone, but I'm trying to keep it under one week."

Mr. Ghazzali pulled over. "Get out," he said calmly.

His command threw me off for a second. Then I reached for the handle and opened the taxi door. With one foot in the cab and the other on the curb, I pulled out a small stack of bills and peeled off a five to pay him for taking up a brief time in his cab. He didn't move to accept it. I thought maybe it was not enough and that somehow

the small amount had insulted him. So quickly I peeled off a ten and extended my arm again.

"I don't know the story of your life, young brother. But I can see that there are no friends in your world. You say you want someone who you can trust, yet you trust no one. No man can do his time alone on this earth. This is why we have the Muslim brotherhood. I invited you to our mosque, yet you haven't shown your face there at Jumma prayer. Is there anything that unites you and me other than this paper money?" he asked me with a stern stare at the measly ten dollars.

I went deep inside my own mind. My father had everything—land, an estate, money, power, family, and friends. In fact, the Muslim brotherhood met on our property, men bent in daily prayer at our mosque, whose children attended the madrassa at our estate, whose wives worked and entertained with my mother. But something did go wrong. And it went wrong enough for me to be standing in the streets of the BX and living in the projects of Brooklyn and grinding on American soil, not the rich earth of the Sudan, where I, my mother and father and father's father and father's father's father and so on were born. If my father, a brilliant and bold, degreed, rich, and successful man could not win and rely on the trust of men in the end, why should I expect it now? *My father is so much better than I am.*

"I don't know, Mr. Ghazzali. The Holy Quran says that 'Allah is sufficient.'" I answered with the only truth that came to mind right then.

"Yes, and your mother's name is Umma, a powerful name. *Ummah!* That word means 'the community of Muslim believers.' The believers have got to stand together, worship together, protect together, fight together, and eat together." He searched me for a response. I didn't have one.

"It's only a few days. Your Umma and sister are welcome to stay in our home. My wife already loves your mother and young sister. My daughter Sudana admires you, so of course she loves your mother. It is only you standing on the outside. Let me be a help to you."

"You know well that my Umma cannot sleep in your home where you have two grown and unmarried sons. And then there is also *you*, Mr. Ghazzali." I looked him in the eye.

"Of course, but there is a separate apartment downstairs. Your mother and my wife were planning to have a women's business there,

remember? Umma can use that apartment. It's well furnished, with a small kitchen, a separate entrance, and a separate key," he told me calmly. I listened but questioned his eagerness in my own mind. I think my seconds of silence insulted him somehow. "Sure, you can choose to put your family in a hotel. There they will be surrounded by kaffirs (nonbelievers), unmarried or married, untrustworthy either way," he said with a stern sarcasm.

"How much do you rent it for?"

"Eh?"

"Your basement apartment."

"Six fifty. Per month," he said, exasperated, and as though he pronounced the first figure that popped up in his head and had never really rented out his basement before.

"Okay. I'll bring you six fifty tomorrow plus the transportation fees." I got out and shut his taxi door, leaned in, and handed him now a twenty-dollar bill. He took it.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see you as the prime minister of the Sudan one day. So much power, business, and intensity in such a young brother," he said.

"Good night," I told him before walking away.

Chapter 7

MY WOMEN

It was well after midnight when I carried my seven-year-old sister on my back to our Brooklyn apartment.

Umma said, “She should really walk on her own two feet.”

Naja said, “But Umma, you two have been out having fun without me. Can’t I at least get a ride on my brother’s back?”

“Out having fun,” Umma replied softly, in her way. Then she looked at me and said, “You see?”

Naja clenched me tightly with no plans of climbing down before the elevator reached our floor and she was “delivered” to her bedroom.

Umma was right, as she usually is. Naja is our protected princess who has no real idea of worry or struggle or stress. I thought that was good. I planned to protect my sister and keep her hidden away from those things that should never be revealed to little girls. In our traditions, a young girl lives under the protection of her father and brothers until she becomes a young woman. Then the father and her brothers will marry her into the protective care of her tried and tested, carefully chosen husband.

As I looked into Umma’s eyes, so striking behind her *nigab* that shielded and covered everything else, I could see and feel that she was worried. I thought to myself, *Umma, don’t you worry. If you are uneasy, I will not move one inch from your side. I will stay right here with you.* But Umma noticed me noticing her, and she cleared her worries and lowered her gaze.

Tuesday, May 6th, 1986

We made Fajr prayer together, my mother, sister, and me, followed by a warm and comfortable breakfast. Umma and I did not discuss the details of my Japan trip until after Naja was safely seated in the school bus to Khadijah's Islamic School for Girls. Naja waved as the bus eased off. She was so happy this morning because she had her sitter, Ms. Marcy, Umma, and me all escort her to the bus. Usually Umma and I are already on our way to Umma's job and Naja is left in the care of Ms. Marcy and walked directly into the care of the teacher who travels with the students on the bus. But today Umma would not report to work until four in the afternoon. She had switched her schedule for this week with a coworker from the night shift. She and I both agreed that there was more planning and work for us to do than time to do it. She also wanted to complete some products for me to deliver to Umma Design customers before I left for Japan.

"When you go to see the jewelers again today, you should also select a gift for your father-in-law," Umma said. She slid an old, high quality jewelry box across the table.

"Why should I? He stole my wife," I answered swiftly yet respectfully. I opened the box. It was a Rolex Datejust. The hands of the clock were paused in time. The crystal was cracked. I had never seen it before.

"Your wife is his daughter. Our family has not ever been able to meet and greet him properly. We haven't offered him anything. Yet he gave me such a lovely daughter-in-law. You just have to go there and ease his fears. Once he sees you and discovers how respectful you are toward him, and sees how much Akemi is in love with you and you with her, his heart will soften toward you. If it does not soften toward you, he will certainly soften his heart for his daughter. Remember that even though we feel sad and insulted and ashamed that Akemi is not with us, he stole her away out of love more than cruelty."

I was not focused on feeling any sympathy toward Naoko Nakamura. I was keeping him right where he needed to be in my mind just in case I had to do him something . . .

I slid the box containing the Datejust in my pocket.

"Umma, I thought I saw worry in your eyes late last night. You know I won't go anywhere if I see that." I was watching her closely.

"I was just tired and I was also thinking too much. After you told me on the train about the arrangement with Mr. Ghazzali, I wondered if he had asked his wife first, if it was okay for me to stay with them while you are away."

"I didn't give him a chance to speak with her first. I rode in his taxi with him and we talked it out right there. He was on his way back out to work for the night."

"I see," Umma said, sounding hesitant. "You know the Ghazzalis are new friends to our family. It has been good for me because Temirah Aunty doesn't ask me personal questions. It is as though our friendship began from the moment I took her and her sister's and daughters' measurements for their garments for their nephew's wedding. And she and I have moved forward from there without ever looking back or discussing the past. I appreciated her for that reason. If I go to stay over there at her house, it may all very well change."

"Then come to Japan with me," I said with a smile. I was serious and sincere. She pushed away and hit me on my shoulder as though the idea was ridiculous. "We have spent every penny of almost one hundred thousand dollars on our new house and I love it. Now we have minus three pennies left!" She laughed. "You go on and get your wife, and Naja and I will stay at Mr. Ghazzali's. Naja will be excited living in a house with such a big family, and her Arabic will improve, I'm sure." Umma brightened all the way up to reassure me that she was okay.

"You know, Umma, even though you and Mrs. Ghazzali have become friends, I handled this as straight business. It's their house, but it's a separate apartment, separate entrance, separate key, and *rent*."

"I know you have made it right for me. And I know their basement apartment is very nice. It is where Temirah Aunty and I plan to have our Sudanese women's group meetings. So I am sure it will be fine." I stood up from our kitchen table where Umma was seated. I needed to grab my things and head out to the diamond district.

In my room I stood still thinking. After twenty minutes or so, I began flipping through a short pile of papers I had concerning my wife. In a small notebook that I rock daily in my right pocket, I jotted down what little information I had on Akemi.

The first word I wrote was *Kyoto*, the place where Akemi was born. The second note to myself was Kyoto Girls' High School, the

place the MOMA art exhibit event pamphlet said Akemi attended school. The third note was the address Akemi had given me for her father, Roppongi Hills, Tokyo, Japan. The fourth note was the address that her father had written down for himself on our wedding documents: Ginza, Tokyo, Japan. Those were my clues. I shoved the notebook in my pocket.

Reluctantly I pulled out the letter that Akemi had written to me and had delivered to Cho's, where I worked my weekend job, on the exact day that she went missing. She had written it all in kanji. Maybe she had explained herself in those pages, or left the name and address of where her father was about to drag her. She knew I could get the letter translated into English, the same way that I had arranged for her marriage documents to be translated into Japanese, and the same for our marriage contract. I pushed her letter into my back pocket. I wanted to know what it said. Yet I didn't want to know what it said. Either way I was gonna go get her, regardless. In a last-minute decision, I grabbed Akemi's diary off my desk, secured my diamonds, and headed out into a blue-gray cloudy day.



Chapter 8

CASH MONEY

By noon I had sold one of my three, three-carat diamonds.

“Where did you get them,” the jeweler asked, eyeing the gem through his loop, which was lodged in his right eye.

“From Africa,” I said, knowing the continent was so huge, that my response was the same as not answering him at all.

“How much will you give me for each of them?” I asked him, without any eagerness in my voice.

We settled on fifteen thousand dollars for one diamond. He pushed hard for a package deal on all three of the diamonds. He also tried to position his pitch as though he was somehow doing me a favor by buying the gems from me, insinuating that they were stolen and he was relieving me of my illegal goods. I smiled at the slickness of his angle, glanced around at the arrangements of counters offering

hundreds of African diamonds for sale. I assured him that the three diamonds in the palm of my hand were not the stolen diamonds, and that right now, only one of these precious stones was available for him to purchase. I sold him one, watched his fingers as he counted out my payment in cash, all hundreds. I saw how each pile of bills that added up to five thousand dollars was half an inch high. When my stack reached one and a half inches high, I left the diamond district with my pockets fat and the whole day in front of me. I had the watch repaired and wore it, like my father had worn it years ago.

* * *

I walked into the first travel agency I came up on, Liberty Travel. It was a place plastered with pictures, posters, and postcards featuring discounted getaways around the world.

"Your destination, please?" the receptionist asked.

"Kyoto, Japan," I responded without any real mental picture of the country. I was good at geography, though, and could easily point out the small island on a world map. I was familiar with the country's shape and size, and even the ocean that surrounded it, but that was all.

"Please have a seat and our Japan agent will be with you in a moment."

"When would you like to travel?" the Japan expert asked.

"Right away," I answered.

She looked up from her terminal with a twisted smile. "Like this afternoon or tomorrow?" she said with sarcastic disbelief.

"How much is the ticket?" I asked, to keep it business.

"Are you in the military?" she asked me oddly.

"No."

"Can I see your passport?" she asked, like an officer of the law. But I didn't have my Sudanese passport on me. I didn't realize that I needed to present it to the travel agent. It was in Brooklyn locked in Umma's chest with papers that Umma would say if lost would make each member of our family invisible.

"You need your passport. This is a big trip, aside from the fact that by ordering the ticket at the last minute, you lose all of the discounts that you could have benefited from if you had come in two weeks to one month prior to your departure date. No one just hops on a plane to a country that's seven thousand miles away without being prepared.

If you don't have a passport, you need to go and get one. The passport office is next door to Rockefeller Center. It's open till six p.m. today. You are an American citizen, right?" she asked. Her question jarred me. I had recently gotten my American citizenship papers, but I am 100 percent Sudanese. On second thought, I would have to get an American passport now that my citizenship was official.

"How long does it take to get the passport?" I asked her.

"Six weeks," she said grimly. I sat frozen in my chair but was rapidly defrosting as the heat began to rise up from my feet, climbing and spreading into my chest.

"Well, you don't need the passport to buy the ticket from me. We ask for it because your airline ticket must show the exact same name that appears on the passport. But you will need the passport to travel outside of the United States.

"If you purchase an airline ticket from me right now, you can take the ticket plus an express fee over to the passport office and receive your passport in three days' time. But the plane ticket is gonna be expensive," she warned.

I eased back in my seat. *That's more like it*, I thought to myself. I was relieved that the conversation looped back around to cash being able to make shit move. That's what I was accustomed to.

"Let's do it," I told her and gave her my exact name as it appeared on my American citizenship papers.

"Date of departure?" she asked again.

"Friday, in three days when I'll have my passport," I answered.

"I recommend that you fly the following day, on Saturday, just in case anything goes wrong. Give yourself twenty-four hours to fix it. Once I issue this ticket, you will not be able to change your departure date or time," she said. "But you can change your return date and time for a fee."

I didn't know it then, but her recommendation would change my life.

I thought about it quickly. I had a basketball game coming up this Friday night with the black team of the Hustlers League. I had been working hard all spring for our team to win the league and for me to get that big money prize that would put me and Umma in a more secure financial space with our business, Umma Designs.

I thought about it further. Every minute and every day that I

delayed, or that passed me by, put too much distance between me and my wife and too much opportunity for anyone who was trying to . . .

“Okay then, I’ll leave on Saturday, May tenth, and return on the following Saturday, May seventeenth. One week, please!”

“Are you sure? It’s two hundred dollars if you change the return date. One week in Japan is not a long time,” she cautioned.

“One week,” I confirmed.

“Would you like to fly American Airlines or Japan Airlines?”

“JAL,” I answered.

Soon she was asking, “How would you like to pay for your ticket? Mastercard, Visa, or American Express?”

“Cash!” I answered. Suddenly I saw how important it was to have a credit card. Up until now Umma and I had done good business without one for seven years living in the United States. Now the agent accepted cash for my airline ticket, and for a rail pass that she recommended for the Shinkansen bullet train. She said the rail pass would allow me to pay one fare but use the bullet train all week for rapid travel back and forth between Tokyo and Kyoto.

She insisted, however, that I needed to give her my credit card for her to secure my hotel reservation. She assured me that these were peak travel months for Japan and I would be looking for trouble without “booking accommodations.” The fact was, I didn’t have one to give her and neither did Umma.

After one hour in the travel agency, I had my tickets in my hand and my head filled with lessons learned. I became real clear that even though I had traveled internationally before, I had been a child back then. All my arrangements had been made by my father. I had never had the challenge of considering the details. Now I had to listen carefully and absorb each piece of info completely. I had to watch more closely, read documents more carefully, and make decisions with confidence although I might not be 100 percent certain.

The travel agent had been pushy and sarcastic. She proved that even if you don’t know a person or even like them one bit, you can still learn something from them to assist you in life. She booked a hostel for me and took the time to teach me the difference between a hotel and a hostel. “A hostel,” she said, “can be found in almost every country in the world. It’s like a hotel but it’s not. It’s housing reserved for traveling students. It’s like a dormitory where you will

stay alongside other students from all over. It's not nearly as luxurious as any three- or four-star hotel. It doesn't offer the same facility or services, but there will be a bed, in either a private room or with a roommate. The cheapest hostels give you a bed in a large room where there are several beds and other students staying there as well. If you were planning a longer stay, I could make sure that you got into a hostel that has a shared kitchen with a full stove and refrigerator and even a shared living room area. The best thing about a hostel, though, is that because it's reserved for students, it's cheap. There are some as low as five dollars for a night." I looked at her skeptically. She added, "But there might not be a television. Can you live without a television?"

I booked a private room in a hostel called Shinjuku Uchi, located in a part of Tokyo called Shinjuku. I could pay in cash once I arrived there, and all I needed to check in was my passport and any student identification card. It was twenty dollars per night and down the street from the Shinjuku station, where the agent told me there was a train going anywhere in the country.

Rushing, I dashed into the passport office to get the application and requirements. I was glad I shot by there. They were asking for all types of documentation. Now that I knew the deal, I wouldn't give them any chances to delay my passport for any reason. I planned to return there in the morning and be the first person to get my joint processed.

Precise Translations was located downstairs in the same building as the passport agency. I stood outside their door gripping Akemi's diary and debating with myself. Nine minutes later, I submitted the letter that Akemi wrote to me in Japanese for translation into English. This was a new translation company for me. The one I had used for everything else involving Akemi and me was on the third floor. I decided not to return to the same company because maybe they already had too much information on me and my young wife. Now, I wanted to believe that these translators remained neutral, minded their business, and just interpreted the words on the paper. What if they didn't? What if the battle between me and my wife's father thickened? I didn't want to be using the translator and paying for translations that might later be used as evidence against me. I held out her diary but then decided against requesting a translation of it.

Although it might contain all the information I needed, it seemed too personal. I thought about Umma and how private she was about her journal and papers and pocketbook. The same respect I would give to Umma, I should give to my wife, I decided.

At my bank where Umma's account was and the teller knew me from placing our deposits regularly, I deposited three thousand dollars of the cash I was holding into Umma's bank account. I also purchased one thousand dollars' worth of American Express Travelers Cheques for my use. The travel agent had recommended this also, and when I checked her reaction when I first tried to book a hotel room with cash, I knew that if I had a few Travelers Cheques, certain establishments would consider me more more legitimate than if I was moving around only with a pocket stuffed with dough.

At the Travelex Money Exchange, I stood on a short line checking out the long list of countries and the names of the money they used. The world was a lot bigger than the American dollar. There was the Sudanese dinar, the Chinese yuan, the German mark, the Indian rupee, the South African rand, the English pound, the Saudi Arabian riyal, and the Japanese yen. I pushed one thousand American dollars through the small curved slot at the bottom of the thick bulletproof glass. The teller turned it into Japanese yen. After being used to handling American green dollars, which were all the same color, shape, and size no matter the amounts, the Japanese yen looked like play money. There were pictures of Japanese men on each bill, some bills tan, some colored blue. The only similarity to American money was that it was all plastered with old men wearing weird hairstyles that I would never rock. They were looking real grim.

Chapter 9

“NEVER COMING BACK”

Back in Brooklyn, I bounced by and picked up Naja. We then escorted Umma to her job by 4:00 p.m. sharp.

“Where are we going now?” Naja asked, her big brown eyes exploring mine.

“You’ll see,” was all I offered.

Down on Fulton Street, right next to Albee Square Mall, I stopped at an outdoor photo booth. I needed to take two passport-sized photos.

“I want to get in the picture with you,” Naja said. I pulled back the curtain, let her slide in first, then sat down beside her.

“It’s gonna take three shots real fast, so quick get ready,” I told her, and dropped in my coins. She was real excited. She pushed her little face up toward the glass that hid the camera. Then she pulled it back. The light flashed three times. I opened the curtain and then stood up. “That’s it,” I told her, letting her climb out.

“Well, where are the pictures?”

“Stand right there. They’ll drop down in a few seconds.”

“What are you doing now?” she asked.

“I gotta take some photos on my own.”

“Why?”

But instead of answering her, I closed the curtain and held her little hand as she stood on the opposite side. The camera snapped three more photos, of just me alone. I opened the curtain. Naja had the first set of pictures in her hand. She stood staring at them.

“Do you think I look pretty?” Naja asked.

“Of course,” I told her.

"For real? Or are you just saying that?" she questioned with a serious face.

"No! I'm just saying that," I teased her.

"Your pictures look better. You look real cool," Naja said to me.

"Don't put your fingerprints on the pictures. Just hold them on the sides like this."

"Why?" she asked, but then she held them the right way.

At the pizza store I brought Naja a slice and a salad.

"Do you think we're weird because we don't eat McDonald's?" she asked, before biting down on an olive.

"No."

"This girl in my class said that everybody normal eats McDonald's. She said that Muslims eat McDonald's too."

"People can do whatever they want to," I answered Naja carefully. "But in our family, we don't worry about what everyone else thinks is normal. We do what we believe is best. So follow Umma, no matter what your friends say."

"Okay." She smiled, contented.

* * *

I phoned Mr. Ghazzali from downtown Brooklyn, but his son Mustapha Salim answered the phone. After extending my greetings, I told him, "I was calling to get your father's permission to stop by your house tonight at ten. I need to hand him something."

"No problem *Wed Ammi*," he said, using a Sudanese term for *cousin*.

"I'll relay your message, but come on by. I'm sure it's okay with Father."

* * *

Feeling decent about how my day was flowing and about accomplishing shit one by one, I headed to Chinatown to do a face-to-face with Cho, the owner of the Chinatown fish market where I worked on Fridays and Saturdays. He was the Chinaman who had reluctantly broken his regular pattern of doing things and given me a job a year ago. In almost fifty-two weekends, I had never missed a workday or even ever arrived late. Whenever he needed me to do overtime, I did it, no problem. So I planned to do the honorable thing and give him a

heads-up about my travel plans, which would cause me to miss three of Cho's busiest workdays.

Naja's little hand was moist in the warm spring air. I held on to it, though, not wanting her to get swept away as Chinatown got invaded by the NY after-work crowd looking for some fresh goods to prepare for dinner.

"You don't have to hold my hand. I won't get lost," she said, as her little feet had to double-step to keep up with my swift pace.

"Oh yeah?" I said still holding on to her.

"If we got separated, I could find you easily. Your sneakers are cleaner than everyone else's and your laces are so cool. How come my sneakers are dirty? How come when you walk around all day, your sneakers never get dirty?" she asked, looking up at me. I just smiled. But I did decide I would buy her a new pair of kicks. We dipped into a sneaker store. She wanted to pick. When she came back with some polka-dot skips, I chose for her instead. The DeQuan in me wouldn't let it slide. He had been the five percenter, fashion regulator, gun dealer, fight promoter, and big brother to his five blood brothers and for my whole Brooklyn block before he got knocked.

Cho and his nephew Chow were in a rhythm, satisfying the customers and knocking them off the line one by one. I waited till the small crowd cleared.

"What you do here on a weekday?" Cho questioned.

"I came to give you a heads-up. This weekend I am going to work Friday like regular, but I have to take off all day Saturday the tenth and the following weekend, the sixteenth and the seventeenth." There was a long pause between us. Cho looked like he was thinking real hard about my simple and clear request. Just then I saw Saachi, Akemi's young cousin, walk up and sit down beside Naja outside Cho's door.

"I'm letting you know now to give you enough time to get someone to fill in for me, okay?" I asked, but I was definite.

Cho folded his arms across his chest. "You chase Japanese girl to the end of the earth!"

Since I don't discuss my wife with other men, I didn't answer Cho. I knew that he knew that my letting him know was a courtesy, not a request. "I'll see you on Friday morning, Cho. Don't count me out. I'll be here for sure," I reassured him.

He mumbled something back at me, some sentences spoken in Chinese. So I figured he must be talking to himself.

"Mayonaka!" Eight-year-young Saachi jumped off the steps and put her hands right on her hips, where she liked to keep them. She was calling me by the name that Akemi called me. Mayonaka, meaning "midnight" in Japanese. Naja followed behind her. Before the little Japanese girl could start dropping her word bombs, her father, who is also my wife's uncle, appeared outside their family store door, which was four doors down from Cho's on the same side of the block.

"Ooh, you better go, you know. Here comes your father," Naja warned Saachi. But the little girl only removed one hand from her hip and said through a half smile, "He's only scary for you guys. My father's very nice to me." She turned on her toes to take off, and I slowed her down. "We'll walk over with you," I said. She and Naja began skipping slowly. Naja got her first scuff mark on her new ACGs.

"*Konbanwa*, Uncle Nakamura," I said, using the Japanese language intentionally.

"Good evening," he answered in English dryly and for his own reasons too.

"How's it going? How's business?" I asked, even though I had just seen him on Sunday when I was searching for Akemi. I suspected that he may have even called the cops on me for loitering outside of his store door, but really for loving and marrying his niece.

"Fine," he responded with one word only.

"See you next time, Saachi," Naja said.

"Good night," I said.

I purposely wanted to appear to be calm and pleasant in this "thought battle" that I was having with the Japanese men in my wife's family. There was no reason to tip him off that I was headed over to take back what was mine. Inside I was boiling once again. I could tell from this uncle's posture that they thought they had won. It was as though they believed that they lived in the first world and I was stuck in the third or fourth or fifth world, that somehow I wouldn't be able to figure out how to cross the Pacific Ocean beyond Alaska and over the Siberian mountains to get my wife. In a short time, they would discover that they were wrong.

"What did Saachi say to you?" I asked Naja.

"First she asked me what I was doing over here. Then she showed

me this string that she had in her pocket and how she could twist it into a bunch of different shapes. Then she asked me if I missed Akemi and if we had heard from her.”

“What did you tell her?”

“What could I tell her? I don’t know anything,” Naja said with her arms raised halfway and palms facing up.

“Are you sure you didn’t say anything extra?” I checked.

“I just told her that I do miss Akemi and that I am sure she will come back real soon.” Then Naja shifted her eyes away from me.

“And?” I pushed.

“And what?” she said softly but understanding the intensity in me. “Saachi said that Akemi is *never coming back*.”

The words of my seven-years-young sister hit me in the chest like powerful kicks.

“But I told Saachi that she really doesn’t know that for sure,” Naja said confidently.

“And?” I continued.

“Saachi said that her father told her that Akemi’s father saved Akemi from ruining her life.”

My jaw tightened. I stood still on the busy block holding my sister’s hand, thinking.

“That’s it, that’s all Saachi said. Oh, wait a minute, I left one thing out. Earlier, she told me that her real name is Sachiko but that she lets people she likes call her Saachi for short. She said Sachiko means ‘happiness.’ But the mean thing she told me about you ruining Akemi’s life, she said that last. Then you came outside.”

Chapter 10

DOJO

“Me and Chris dipped into our funds and bought you a wedding present. We *could’ve* got you something before, if you *would have* let us know you was getting married,” Ameer said.

We were in the dojo locker room suiting up in our *dogis*—me, Ameer, and Chris, my two best friends. They were weeks late with their gift, but it was cool. Truth is, I wasn’t expecting anything at all.

“So, since the money came from our car fund, that means that I paid for a third of my wedding gift?” I said, kidding them about the money that we all three had saved up over our seven-year friendship.

“True, true.” Chris smiled. “But, brother, that’s not the point!” Chris added.

“So where is it?” I asked, standing with my arms extended doubtfully.

“It’s at Ameer’s place,” Chris said.

I turned toward Ameer and asked him, “Is this gift something that you used first? ‘Cause if you already used it, you can keep it. Y’all know I don’t like leftovers!” I slammed my locker shut, laughing.

“That’s cold,” Ameer answered. “Maybe I *should* use it first.”

We hit the floor, taking up our positions.

Naja shrank herself into a corner beneath the large, antique gray metal fan, reading the new book I had just bought her.

During the second dojo hour, Sensei called out for sparring. Although he always chose random partners, he tried to avoid putting me, Chris, and Ameer up against one another. He put me against a muscular heavyweight instead, an old dude, about twenty-nine or so.

It wasn’t a conscious choice for me to place the face of Akemi’s

rude-ass uncle over the face of my sparring partner. *Akemi is never coming back.* I kept hearing that one sentence. I must have heard it too much or too loud in my mind. I landed a blow to my opponent that shifted his jaw and cracked his nose. It was only his slow stream of blood running from his nose, over his lips, and onto his teeth that brought my mind back into focus and into the dojo.

"My bad, man," I said. Sensei stood staring. It didn't move me. We are warriors and some blood gotta spill sometimes. This time was not the first time someone caught a bad one in our ninjutsu dojo.

Later, outside the dojo, me, Ameer, and Chris conspired in the warm night weather.

"What's up for tonight?" I asked them.

"Nothing, man. You brought your kid sister. I wanted you to come through the East tonight," Ameer said, referring to East New York.

"Word? Chris, you headed to the East?" I asked.

"Punishment, remember? I'm still on punishment." As we all laughed, Chris's father, Reverend Broadman rolled up, pushing the Caddy, and snatched Chris up.

"How 'bout tomorrow night? I can come through after ball practice but it'll be late," I told Ameer.

"Nah, then come through in the afternoon after I get back from school, 'round four thirty. It'll be safer for you then." Ameer glanced down at my father's watch, then smiled. "You know how the East—"

"Yeah, you know me." I gave him a pound. "I'll check you tomorrow," I said as I walked away.

"I wouldn't want none of them boys around my way to steal your wedding gift from you, especially after you paid for it and I used it first!" Ameer said with a laugh. He got that one off on me.

"Later," I told him, and grabbed my sister's hand and kept moving.

"Is it wrong if I think that your friend is handsome?" Naja asked me, as we rode on the train and after being unusually silent the whole time.

"What do you mean?" I said, shocked, and having nothing else to say.

"You know like he gives a girl a special feeling when she looks at him, Ameer does," she said quietly.

"Don't look at him then! That's why the Quran teaches us to

lower our gaze. When you see boys, don't stare at them. Don't talk to them. Don't let them look into your eyes and you don't look into theirs either. Don't do anything," I scolded her, feeling off guard.

"It's only the first time I felt that," she said softly. "And I don't see boys or stare at them either. I go to an all-girls school, remember? Maybe I only noticed him because you brought me here again. Sorry," she apologized.

"I'm sorry too." I hugged my sister with one arm. "I won't bring you there no more, and you let your first time feeling be your last time feeling, until . . ."

"Until when?" she asked.

"Until it's time for you to marry."

"Who knows when that is?" she said below her breath.

Chapter 11

LOCK & KEYS

The yard light flashed on and Mustapha opened the fence at 10:00 p.m. on the dot. He greeted me first, then shifted his greeting to Naja.

“Hey, are you sleepy?” he asked her in English. But Naja wouldn’t lift her head to allow her eyes to look at him or even toward him. I guess she was taking my scolding to heart and to the extreme. But I thought it was good that she knew I was serious. I thought it was even better that she was already making an effort.

“Hi. Nope, I’m not sleepy yet but I’m about to be,” Naja said, still staring down at either her own two feet or the Ghazzali’s grass.

“Come on in,” he welcomed us.

“It’s my friend the prime minister,” Mr. Ghazzali said with a serious tone yet a genuine smile. I felt bad about greeting his warmth with suspicion, but somehow, suspicion had become a significant part of me. His playful tone and the name that he had dubbed me, “the prime minister,” was not a compliment to me. My father had been the top adviser to the true prime minister of the Sudan. I secretly wondered if Mr. Ghazzali had known that all along or if maybe he only recently figured it out.

When my father would come home to the comfort of our Sudanese estate, El Beit Rahim, that he built, he was sometimes filled from head to toe with dilemmas. On some nights, I didn’t even need the children’s books that he often gifted to me. My father would sit at my side in my bedroom and tell me stories that he pulled from the depths of his mind and core of his heart. Instead of talking serious politics with me, a young boy at that time, he would give his

higher-ups, and subordinates animal titles, revealing their characters and actions woven into a simple tale. He would tell me the story of one general, starring “the vulture,” who invited and dined on death. One of his cabinet members he described as an elephant who no one could help but notice because of his size. An elephant who took up more than his share of space, made incredible piles of poop, ate up everything, but did nothing else. I would laugh at my father’s tales and then ask him, “What animal are you, Father?” My father would think first, then break out in a broad smile, each of his sparkling white teeth set perfectly in his mouth. “I am the camel. I can go for long months without water, although I prefer to drink every day. I can store food and eat it on a day when there is nothing else and everyone else’s food is gone. I can carry many men on my back through the desert to an oasis that I know for certain is there. Yet the men usually give up before we reach there, and I am left alone and saddled with their luggage.”

At seven years young, I didn’t know the word *metaphor*. Now, as a teenaged young man, I understood exactly what my father meant.

When I asked my father which animal our Umma is, he stood up, standing six-foot-eight, and walked a few steps in circles. “Umma,” he said, “cannot be described as any animal. She is the sun. No matter where I am traveling in the world, I can feel her warmth and heat. If I look into the sky, she is there radiant and shining. She can never be mistaken for anyone else. When she walks away for even a short time, I can’t wait for her return. If she were never to return, nothing else would matter.”

My father silenced me with his words that night as my mind gripped their meaning. A tear did come to my childish eyes. “You must not cry,” my father cautioned me. “It is our job to keep the tears from Umma’s eyes. It is every man’s and every son’s job to bring happiness to mothers and wives and sisters.”

“Good evening, Mr. Ghazzali,” I greeted him.

“I know you will want to get right down to business. You and I can step into my office. Maybe your sister can sit with my oldest daughter, Basima.” Mr. Ghazzali called upstairs for Basima to come down. Sudana appeared instead.

“Basima is still at Fordham U. She said she will be there studying

for her final exams,” Sudana told her father. Mr. Ghazzali seemed disturbed for some seconds and then pulled himself out of the mood. Sudana took Naja with her.

“My sister and I have to meet Umma at her job at midnight,” I told him, so he would be mindful of my time. It was already 10:15.

In his office I paid out the \$650 for rent and \$500 for him to deduct his fees for his transportation services. As he dropped the keys into a small envelope and pushed the envelope across the desk to me, he said, “Here is the key for the separate entrance, and another key for the extra night lock that we place on the fence. Since Umma and Naja will be escorted each night, she probably won’t have any use for the night lock.”

“Let me write out the address for Umma’s job and—,” I began saying.

“I’ll drive you there tonight so that I can be sure about the location and route. And then you will feel more comfortable also.”

After a pause, I agreed. “Can I take a look at your basement apartment before we leave?” I asked.

“Sure, for the next thirty days, it’s *your* basement apartment, starting”—he glanced at his modest Timex with the black leather band—“right now!” He smiled. I looked at the keys inside the small envelope, realizing that his welcoming us into his home was an act of trust even though I was paying the rent.

Downstairs I checked the place, each window and door and room. I opened every closet, cabinet, and drawer. “Sudana cleaned up very well for your Umma,” he said. “Actually, the place was cleaned up all the while. I have never rented it to anyone else. I have only had a few nephews and nieces stay here—you know, family.”

My eyes went to the only door leading to the outside. My mind was focused on that instead of Ghazzali’s words. I knew that I would install a dead bolt slide lock. I had no way of knowing exactly how many people had copies of Mr. Ghazzali’s keys, even if they were his family members. But at least when Umma and Naja were here inside the place, they could use the dead bolt to prevent anyone from outside from entering while they were home. Looking at the wall and the door molding, I knew it would take my handheld drill, either that or a locksmith. I told myself that Ghazzali would understand. I saw how he already had solid steel bars blocking all five of the tiny rect-