

Chapter 1

ABANDONED

I wake to the thump of my own heart, my cheek stuck to the rubber mattress. Flies crawl around my eyes and into the corners of my open mouth. I smell the milky sourness that comes from a roomful of children, sense the warm air on my limbs. For a minute, I lie without moving, absorbed in these sensations that tell me I exist. I am alive.

Then, I'm all yearning.

I wait for a voice that doesn't come. A familiar smell, of bitter oil mixed with perfume. Arms that encircle me. A face I know. But there's nothing. I'm hungry. I begin to yell. I hear my own crying and scream more loudly; the roar fills my head, pierces my ears, until there is nothing in the world but my screaming.

My fingers find the cool bars; as I grip them, my crying slows. Crying is useless. Crying brings nothing. I pull myself up, still searching for the face that doesn't come. I bang my head against the metal. Feel the judder that runs through the bars and back into my hands. The jarring of my head against the cot tells me there is something there. Bang, bang, bang.

I can hear other kids doing the same. Banging. Rocking. Thumping.

It's during these days, these months, before I can speak or think, that the 'unfuture' closes around me. The unfuture is a state of emptiness, of waiting, that never ends. Of wanting, that dwindles to hopelessness.

Milk keeps me alive. I clench the bottle between my hands, sucking hard on the teat. I swallow every drop and when it's finished I scream for more. I chuck the empty bottle over the bars; it clatters on the floor. I pause, and look at the way it rolls, empty. Then I begin to yell again, this time banging my head on the wall.

This is my life, given to me by God's will. I won't let it go.

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A year later, or maybe two, I emerge from Mygoma orphanage, alive. Three of us leave together in a car: me, Amal and Wagir. I am on the seat next to the window, Amal is in the middle and Wagir bounces on the lap of a nanny. No one comes out to see us off. The taxi bumps and lurches over the potholes as it pulls away into the ordinary day. We sit in the back, startled by the light, the noises, the smells.

Amal and I wear the same new cotton dresses, in a pattern of squares with a bobby texture. The shoulders hang down on our elbows; the hems droop to our ankles. For the first time, I have shoes on my feet. White plastic sandals, strapped tight. I am using one shoe to try and prise off the other when the nanny reaches over and slaps my calf. She wipes away the snot coming out of Amal's nose.

'God protect us,' she mutters, pulling her tobe further forwards over her face. 'What is to become of such children?'

I look at her. I don't understand words. Only voices.

The air smells of dust and exhaust fumes, of bean patties frying at stands by the side of the road and the morning's bread, carried in baskets on women's heads. Schoolchildren wait in crowds for buses; goats stand on their hind legs, biting at the leaves on the branches of trees. Lines of cars queue at petrol stations; men exit from the mosque, pulling on their shoes.

The taxi driver winds down his window and calls out to people for directions. He stops in front of a high wall with wrought-iron gates set into it. He leans on his horn and a man emerges and drags open the gates. He sees me staring at him and brings his hand up to his forehead in a sharp salute. The car rolls up a sandy drive edged with bushes, to where a woman stands waiting on the steps of a big house with shuttered windows.

I don't want to leave this car. I get down on the floor, behind the driver, grabbing hold of the bottom of the seat. The nanny drags me out by my arm. A crowd of children gathers, all taller and older than me. They surround us, staring at us. In front of me is a girl with a round, dark face. She has two plaits, small teeth, quick eyes. She steps forwards, grabs me under my armpits and lifts me up. She holds me against her chest, staggers, then slides me on to her hip. I recognize the pressure of her arms, the strength of her body. She is part of a dream I once had. The circle of children, the smell of blossom, fall away as I grope after something out of reach, below the surface of memory.

The girl hugs me hard and, without warning, drops me on to the sandy ground. She walks off. The children laugh and suck their fingers. The nanny climbs back into the battered yellow taxi and it slides down the path to disappear through the open gates.

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'What are you waiting for?' A woman stands over my bed. She twitches the sheet off me with one hand and with the other lifts me by my arm on to the floor. I feel the chill of the tiles under my feet, see the dizzying pattern of leaves stretched over her belly at the height of my head.

'What's your name?'

I stare at her face.

'Copy the others,' she says, leading me towards the door. 'And you'll be all right.'

So begin my days at the Institute for the Protected. This bed is the centre of my new world. I wake up in it, dizzy from the lack of bars. I wriggle against the wall, press my spine against the plaster, for something solid to tell me where I end and the world begins. The room is full of birdsong; light forces its way around the shuttered window, and falls in stripes and diamonds across the walls. The sheet underneath me is made of rough blue cotton. Below the bed is a brown tiled floor, measured out in squares. A curled shape rests under another sheet on the far side of the room. I know without thinking about it that it is Amal.

A clanging metal bell makes me jump. Two other girls rise immediately from their beds, their eyes still shut. They fold their sheets, holding the corners in their teeth. I slide off the bed and cross the squared floor to where Amal is resting. I can swing open the door of the cupboard and climb up to the third shelf for my dress. There are beads on the next shelf to play with. Beyond this room lie other worlds: the bathroom, where mosquitoes hover and whine in the gloom. Amal and I stick close together in there. The smell - carbolic soap, stagnant water - carries danger. Then there is the big girls' bedroom, next to ours, and the dining room, with chairs crowded around its long table. Behind the house is a sandy garden where we play, and at the end of it a clump of lime trees by the wall, so far away from the house that they are in another country. This bigger space that stretches from my bed all the way to the trees opens up something inside me. Released from the cot, my movements grow larger. Away from the constant noise of crying, I hear the sound of my own voice. In the mornings, braced against the wall, I experiment with this voice, singing and chatting with the birds until the bell rings.

Whenever I can, I watch the girl. I stare at her quick feet as she plays hopscotch in front of the house. I study her small hands as she eats her breakfast and examine her plaits, the long twists of hair. The nannies call her Zulima. I feel her looking at me. Our eyes meet and glance off each other. Sometimes she grabs me, swinging me on to her lap. 'Say "hello",' she says, leaning her face in close to mine. 'Say "goodbye". Say "Zulima".'

I gaze at her face, her tongue, the movement of her lips. Her breath smells like water.

'What's the matter with you?' she asks, fiercely. 'Don't you remember anything?'

She walks away.

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The nannies are bad-tempered before the visitors come. From when they arrive, we're not allowed to play inside in case we make a noise. If we do, the nannies slap at us. Some children get hit more than others. Ahmed trips over other kids; he drops things and forgets what he's meant to be doing. He's always in trouble. The nannies call him Shaitan. Devil.

The ladies who come for meetings never hit us. They are tall and slim. They wear high-heeled mules, carry handbags. The Director comes out of her office to greet them. Their drivers sit under the trees till they are ready to leave again. Sometimes they let the boys sit in the cars. On their way out, the ladies call us to come and see them. They ask how old we are and what our names are and they talk in bright voices then smile sadly over our heads. I can smell their scent in the air after they've gone. The nannies throw off their shoes and laugh a lot, once the gate closes again.

Every day after lunch we have to lie down and rest. I fidget, waiting for the time to pass. I'm not allowed to talk to Amal, to sing or to sit up. The nannies lie on beds in the hallway, chatting. It's during these afternoons that I learn the words that will cling to my ears all my life: Awlad Haram. Bint Haram. Forbidden children. Daughter of shame. Sometimes they talk about one child, sometimes about all of us. Ahmed's name is always on their lips. I hear him coughing, from the boys' bedroom.

Sometimes I hide. I cram myself into a cupboard, crouch behind the door to the big girls' room, press myself behind the trunk of one of the lime trees. I know that when I am found, I might be in trouble. But I like hearing the nannies calling my name, knowing they're searching for me.

What I hate most is when they shove my head into a bowl of water. They rub soap over my head with strong fingers, sloshing more water over me so the soap goes in my eyes. Afterwards I stand between the nanny's knees, my head back, while she drags a comb through my hair. I scream throughout, unless it's Nanny Samia. Nanny Samia is younger than the others; her body is soft and her face round, with three long curving scars down each cheek. I run my fingertips down them as she dries my hair with a towel. She laughs. When she hugs me I feel happy. It reminds me of something.

Amal and I share the room with three other girls. The oldest, Nahid, keeps her clothes on the shelf above mine. Her face is hard and fierce when she looks down at me; she catches hold of my hand and bends it back towards my wrist until it makes a cracking noise. She grabs my biscuit at breakfast and sticks out her tongue when she looks at me. One day she tears the sandal off her foot and attacks me with it, hitting and slapping me all over. She says I've broken her necklace.

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Amal and I start to go to a special room in the garden of the Institute. Nanny Souad says we have to go because we are five. Children who don't live at the Institute come there. They stare at us and we stare at them. All the children

have to sit on the floor and a woman stands in front of us. She is not a nanny. She is something else. I don't listen to what she says except when she sings to us. I like hearing her voice, singing.

Amal and I always sit together. When it's time to go back to the Institute for lunch, I hide by a tree outside. I watch the other children going home. There is one girl called Lublubah. The same woman comes every day to meet her. The woman is young and pretty. She wears a pink tobe and she has gold bangles on her arms and dark patterns on her hands and feet. She comes up the path, smiling, and when she sees Lublubah she opens her arms. Lublubah runs towards her and the woman lifts her up in the air, kissing her face. I watch every day, I never get tired of seeing it. One day, I ask Lublubah what that nanny's name is and she says she is not a nanny. She says that is her mother.

The nannies sleep at the Institute, but the Director arrives in the mornings dressed in a white tobe. Her name is Madame. She bends down to shake our hands and sometimes she calls one of the nannies and asks: why haven't they washed our faces, or cut our nails? The nannies always say 'yes' to her and they never say 'no'.

At lunchtime, after I've watched Lublubah go out of the gates, I go and sit on the steps of the Institute until the Director comes out, with her handbag on her arm.

'You here again?' she says, when she sees me on the steps.

I look at her.

'Are you settling in all right?' she asks, in a kind voice.

And then she answers her own question.

'As well as can be expected,' she says.

Musa, the guard, salutes her when she leaves, like he salutes me. I start to salute her too when I see her. It makes her laugh. I feel happy when I hear her laugh. It means she has noticed Leila, and not just a girl with a dirty face.

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