



The Shores of Our Souls
Kathryn Brown Ramsperger
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Pitch perfect writing. More than a romance, more than a cultural exploration, this novel helped me better understand our complicated world.

—AUTHOR TAMI LEWIS BROWN, *THE MAP OF ME*

An intriguing debut novel! The author wove two compelling stories of star-crossed lovers with great intricacy. I felt such deep compassion for them both. I couldn't put it down!

—AUTHOR OF *OVERCOMERS, INC.* -
LYNNE KLIPPEL



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THE SHORES OF OUR SOULS

*Culture shaped them. Chance united them.
Love transformed them.*

KATHRYN BROWN RAMSPERGER

Qasim, an Arab Muslim U.N. official fleeing family obligations in 1980s war-torn Lebanon meets Dianna, escaping her rural Southern roots to become a researcher at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Will their love be enough in this war-torn, conflict-weary world? Ramsperger's debut novel gives an entirely new perspective on the controversial conflicts in our hearts and in our history.

KATHRYN BROWN RAMSPERGER is an award-winning author, editor, and creativity coach. She began her career with National Geographic and Kiplinger. She also worked for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent. *The Shores of Our Souls* was a semifinalist in the 2017 Faulkner-Wisdom Literary Competition. She's also recipient of the Hollins University Fiction Award. Married and the parent of two, she's worked in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and currently lives in Maryland. Email: info@shoresofoursouls.com
www.shoresofoursouls.com



A remarkable love story and so very timely. It highlights the tensions of the Middle East and our modern world and also the power of love. There is a deep, powerful, and inspiring lesson in this adventure tale. —AUTHOR JOHN PERKINS, *CONFESSIONS OF AN ECONOMIC HITMAN*

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*"We heal in the **SPACE BETWEEN** our thoughts and our reaction to our thoughts. That space is accessed through our Imagination and Creativity. If we open that door, we can rewrite our future."*

Certified Intuitive Coach, Speaker, and Trainer Kathryn Brown Ramsperger specializes in peace building. She believes we first find our peace within, then integrate it into our daily lives, then pass it on to others, ultimately changing our world. She's written extensively on this subject, both fiction and non-fiction, including her recent novel *Incongruent*. Kathryn began her career as a journalist, and then spent 15 years as a humanitarian worker, both nationally and internationally. She became convinced that there was a way to get past the stress and trauma she saw others experience. She's found a way, and she wants to share it.

Kathryn uses an approach called In-Vizion[®], based on cutting edge scientific research, to assist her clients to get unstuck, then creates a mutual, step-by-step plan to empower them to reach their goals. She is one of a handful of trainers for the Master Intuitive Coach Institute. She's also an accomplished communicator, versed in what media need. She has a compassionate, down-to-earth, straightforward style, and an understated wit. Most of all, she has the ability to rock your world, so you can rock the world!

Kathryn can address your listeners' most pressing problems:

How can I have inner peace with so many problems in the world?

If I'm so successful, then why am I so overwhelmed?

Is it time to leave my job, and if so, what's my next step?

My child is stressed out at school. Is it ADD, anxiety, or something else?

Why do I keep doing things I know I shouldn't? How can I break this habit?

How do I get over tragedy?

I give up! How do I achieve work/life balance?

I have a creative block. How can I get past it?

Kathryn is also willing to share her own story. She has successfully overcome many obstacles including her mother's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease when she was 12; the loss of a child; and a cancer diagnosis when she was 40. She's lived throughout the world and has a special interest in Middle Eastern issues.

PRAISE:

"My transformation has been amazing from the inside out! I had amazing results! Kathryn helped me find the complete me – a healthy mind, body, and spirit!"

Lisa Springston, Business Owner

"Her methods really work. There's no more fun and effective way to gain personal insight and get yourself on track!"

Tami Brown, Author

"Kathryn's range of writing and other communications reflect her eclectic style related to nonprofit, institutional and individual clients. That she can serve such a range of interests, finding the careful balance between what clients want and need and what will best serve their interests, distinguishes her work. She has sensitivity to a person's uniqueness, she has the ability to capture the nub of what's important, and she has integrity.

Ruth Schimel, Community Leader

"It's rare to find Kathryn's unique blend of professional experience of journalism, global relief and development, the health field, international business, and coaching. She's a real gem!"

Liz Roll, Photographer and Film Maker

Kathryn Brown Ramsperger
11509 Hitching Post Lane
Rockville, MD 20852
(301) 275-2446
kathyramsperger@gmail.com
shoresofoursouls.com

THE SHORES OF OUR SOULS

A Novel

By Kathryn Brown Ramsperger

I love you when you bow in your mosque,

Kneel in your temple

Pray in your church,

For you and I are sons of one religion

And it is the Spirit.

What difference is there between us,

Save a restless dream that follows

My soul but fears to come near you?

—Khalil Gibran

The Prophet

We often lose ourselves in love; rarely do we find ourselves there. Never do we see it coming.

QASIM

Chapter One

Civil War

April 13, 1975, Beirut

Gunmen kill four Christians during an assassination attempt on Lebanese Maronite leader Pierre Gemayel. Believing assassins to be Palestinian, the Christians attack a bus of Palestinian passengers, killing at least twenty-six. Civil War begins.

“Qasim, where are you, my son?”

I rifle through my papers, trying to complete my thoughts before my mother discovers me. I am wrestling with some legal details before sending paperwork to our attorney. This side of business has always been an anathema to me, and I have delayed dealing with it for far too long. I have spent *al Juma'a*, our holy day, working on my master's thesis in secret. I spent all evening looking over my shoulder. Had my mother discovered me working when I should have been praying, she would have given me, a grown man, a good thrashing.

“Qasim!” My mother swings the double doors open and stands in the doorway, sunlight filtering over her like a fluorescent bubble, hand on her left hip, head tipped to the opposite side. “Qasim, did you not hear me call your name? I was afraid I had missed you. The streets are explosive today. I heard reports of gunfire over by one of the camps. You didn't pass by it, did you?”

“No, Mama,” I reply and reach to massage the scar that outlines my throbbing cheek. I ignore her reference to the camp. “I'm trying to complete something here.”

“Work, work, work. That is all you boys ever do any more. Just like your father.” She perches on the edge of the upholstery, her fingers tapping on her lap.

“That is what men do,” I remind her.

“My youngest, all grown up,” she says, half to herself. My mother is too shrewd for the boring details that occupy my days. I would be surprised if she spent most of her day plotting for all her sons, rearranging our future. Thus far, she has certainly met with success, leaving only a few skeletons in her wake. .

Yet the conflict in the region has diverted even *her* attention outward. What happens outside our home is now of more importance than what happens within it. Still, one must keep up appearances.

These days, I am happy to forget my own assortment of skeletons. I forget my mother’s face over mine in the hospital, willing me to live. I forget the shame that covered my father’s entire countenance once I finally could breathe on my own. I forget my brothers’ hasty comings and goings. I forget the imam’s warnings; I already have known a kind of death; why should I fear nothingness? Most of all, I forget—I *will* myself to forget my wedding day. It is a haze, as is my life. I have money, prestige, my work. *One day I will have a mistress, I suppose.* For a time, I will hibernate in my fog. I hide any wreckage well, even from myself. *Who has time for one more irksome female?* I laugh, I joke, I am my old charming self. I am there but not there. Work has been my salvation.

I hear a rustling in the hallway. I walk to the doorway, thinking it is a colleague coming to get me, tired of waiting for me at the offices. Instead, Rasha sways on the bottom step, hovering above the landing, in her flowing white chiffon. “Qasim?” she says, her voice a blend of croak and whisper. She looks every bit a ghost.

“What is the matter, Rasha?” I ask. I am irritated at all the attention I am expected to bestow on females when they know I should be at my office.

“Qasim?” She repeats the question and sways some more. Her eyes seem glazed, and so I sigh, mount the staircase, and guide her by the elbow back to her bedroom. “I am not feeling well,” she says.

“You rest,” I tell her. “Rest is what you need.”

She suppresses a whimper. “I should not bother you with this...”

“Perhaps I will send for your sister when I go to town?” I reassure her. “That would do you good.” I dread having her sister in our home. Perhaps she will be gone by the time I return. *I will work late.*

She pulls her elbow from my grasp and flops down onto the coverlet. “Yes, that would do me good,” she replies. “Thank you, Qasim. *Shukran.*”

“Qasim!”

“Yes, Mama?” I am truly irritated. *Will I never be able to attend to important matters?*

“Qasim, I need you to take care of that spent ammunition today.” My mother is in the hallway, holding a slim cigarette in a hand that trembles just enough for me to notice.

The ammunition was a curiosity at first. Tariq dragged it home one morning. It was evening, and Rasha yelled for me to go outside to see what he was bringing home. I leaned over the balcony first, as she is prone to fits of needless anxiety. Tariq’s body, brown as a coconut, was bent over, walking backwards, towing it along, a cloud of dust making him sputter. He had broken a strap of one of his sandals, so he was limping, too. His dark, soulful eyes were lit up with wonder. *How I love that boy!*

At first, I was merely bemused. He reminded me of a peddler who couldn’t get his donkey to obey. I couldn’t imagine what he was dragging that nearly matched his weight. When I realized his claimed treasure was weaponry, I became as agitated as Rasha. When I learned he

had picked it from a gutter lining rue Omar ad-Daouk, as innocently as he would have plucked a flower from a bush, I was frightened.

We had not thought things were so far gone that we needed to warn him about unexploded ammo. What would be next, landmines disguised as toys? Our Tariq would not need the excuse of disguise to investigate. His natural curiosity always gets the best of him. Sadly, artillery dots every neighborhood, begging for investigation from curious children. Tariq has never known this country at a time of relative peace. Weapons are more familiar to him than to me, his father. Perhaps not commonplace because we keep our war well hidden, but familiar, as familiar as the tooth he lost last month.

I brought the shell around to the courtyard immediately wondering whom to call to rid ourselves of it. Tariq cried bitterly that he could not keep it. We brought our neighbor, old Ahmed, a veteran of prior wars, over to inspect it. He bent and rose, bent and rose, as though he were praying, as he pored over the still strange object. Finally, he pushed the glasses off the tip of his nose and squinted toward me. "Harmless," he pronounced. "A dud." With that, he turned and collapsed on the courtyard bench, fanning himself. He ensured us it would not explode in Tariq's hands should he not heed our warnings to look, not touch.

"What is it?" I asked. "What sort of weapon is this? I have never seen such a curious weapon."

"They're using some kind of ancient weaponry. Looks as old as the last World War. Must be some little-funded faction that launched it. If it hasn't exploded in thirty-five years, it's not going to go off in your garden." He laughed from his throat, and then his eyes drifted and glazed. He was back in his own world again.

The monstrosity sat in the courtyard for a few days while I searched for someone in the government who would retrieve it. They wanted nothing to do with it. There it sat: ugly metal, covered with soil and rust, a visible reminder of the war raging round us, while we went about our everyday business. Tariq treated it almost as a playmate or a pet. He actually talked to it but minded us and never touched it again. A shower washed some of the mud away, revealing tiny scratches in the metal, like mosaic patterns, and when the sun glinted from the right direction, one could almost look on it as sculpture. It had a protuberance near the top creating a depth of field on its shiny, cylindrical surface that refracted light and shadow just so. I had once seen a water tower rising out of the desert sand in the middle of nowhere that produced a similar effect. I began to look on the cylinder as, at the very least, a part of our lives, and at most, a work of art. Our lives continued around it, at least until we found someone willing to take it away.

Oh yes, every now and then we overhear a burst of gunfire, syncopated with shouts of injury. Yet largely our lives are about money exchanging hands at my office, listening to Tariq recite his prayers and lessons, running the household, alternating weekend visits to our families, and winding our way down to the beach, which is brimming bikini-clad young starlets catching the sun. Beirut moves forward even as the bullets fly, and so must I.

Long after evening prayer, I arrive home with news. Tariq lies on his belly under the same table I once used as a hiding place, reading.

“What is that, son?” I ask, and he grunts an answer. More than likely it is a book of riddles or a puzzle book. I wish he would read as I did. His dusty feet thump on the tile floor, and his straight hair sticks up at the crown like a rooster.

Rebuffed, I climb the stairs to my room. It is a day of heat, inexplicably stifling in this Mediterranean climate. My shirt sticks to me, the sweat entwined on every hair lining my chest.

My tie, normally as comfortable to me as the neck it encircles, chokes me. I go upstairs, lay my jacket carefully on the back of my butler's valet, and loosen my tie. There, I can breathe.

I sit on the edge of my large bed, and I notice my wife has bought a new coverlet since the last time I sat here. I've told her I am not in need of new bed linens often. She feels compelled to replace mine when she replaces her own. I lean forward, rest my elbows on my knees, and take a deep breath. I am unprepared to break this news, but break it, I must. The offer is on the table, and I must answer soon. I am still undecided about which way I will go, yet the family has to know of my intent. I rub my eyes, hoping it will give me greater clarity, if not greater strength.

No one in my family will support me if I take this offer. My father and brothers will forever be wrapped up in manufacturing boxes and counting their money. Perhaps my mother will finally learn to live without me by her side. My wife is focused on changing coverlets every six months. My son is about to begin school. This is what is important to them, their day-to-day-to-day. They do not see what is in store for our country. They think it will end tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, then the day after. Over 100 killed, and many more wounded, and to us, it could almost be in another country. We are practiced at hiding things from ourselves.

Perhaps I should stick with the familiar. The pit of my stomach churns at the thought of leaving Beirut, even for a short time. I am adept at negotiation, even better with numbers. I have an agile mind, which could, in time, bring the family even greater prosperity than it already knows. Yet what will become of the coins my brothers and I spend our time counting should this country destroy itself? Should my efforts not be toward saving all of Beirut? I run my hands through my hair and prepare for battle. Better to win Rasha over before I tell my parents. I put one foot in front of the other, and down the stairs I go.

I find Rasha in the corner of the sitting room, folding linens for the party we will host tomorrow. She has drawn the shades against the sun, which blazes this time of year even in the early evening. She looks up at me, but I cannot determine whether she knows that I have news to share. Her round eyes are always so wide open that they could go no further even if they were pried off their hinges. I stand a moment longer, searching for words. This is the first time Rasha has stirred fear in me—unease, sometimes a familiar disgust, other emotions, yes, but not fear. I must choose my words with great care.

“Qasim?” Rasha’s tone is at once expectant and resigned.

I decide that if I convey enough physical energy, I will win my point. I dance around a bit in front of her and grin, giving me further time to think. “I had a nice day,” I say.

“Oh?” She begins to fold again, over once, over again, and then she pulls the napkin corner through to make a festive design. I wonder if she is even listening, which gives me courage.

“I have been offered a position, a very prominent position, entry level to be sure...”

I notice her hands have stopped folding in mid-air. She suspects something. I switch tacks.

“The family business is still uppermost in my commitments.” I stride forward and sit down beside her. I take her hand; perhaps that will help. “I can do both. I have so much energy, and this country means so much to us all.”

“What on earth are you speaking of, Qasim?” Her wide forehead furrows, and I know there is more work to be done. I forget sometimes that she knows nothing of the working world.

“I have been offered a temporary position at the United Nations.”

“What?” She throws my hand away from her, rises, and lets the linens fall from her lap onto the rug. *I love that rug, the way it shines a different color depending on the light.*

“We will need to close the house for a while.”

“What?” Rasha repeats. I decide to be quiet for a moment, let her absorb the shock. She paces over to the window, opens the shade, and paces back toward me. I clutch my own hands together. “Qasim, am I not a good wife to you? Is Tariq not a good son? Why would you want to move back into your mother’s house?”

I gasp and then chuckle, for I realize she has again missed the point. “No, no, Rasha! Never worry about that. Under no circumstances are we ever to be dependent on my family again. No, we are going to move to the States for a time. I will be a diplomat.”

She looks at me, and she struggles to contain herself. “I repeat—my husband, am I not a good wife? Do I not make you happy?”

The question sends me reeling for a moment. I was going one way with this conversation, and she is taking it the other. “Happiness is not the issue, Rasha,” I snap. “We should speak about this matter when you are better able to grasp it.”

She follows me to the bottom of the staircase and pulls limply at my wrist. “Qasim...how? Why, this, all of a sudden? Who has offered you this job? This is our home, Qasim! Why would we ever leave, even for a month?” She is blubbering now, and I have had enough.

“As I said, we will discuss this later.” I walk up the staircase with what I hope to be deliberation. Times like these, I wish I *had* time for a mistress. Yet, that would be just one more woman I had to pacify.

That night, an explosion rocks the house, and I turn over in bed. It is not yet dawn, and I am accustomed to the noise of civil war. Then consciousness takes over, and I realize how close the blast is to the house. I race to the back balcony. Fear clutches every pore of my body like the jaws of a great animal.

“Rasha,” I shout. “Rasha!” I cannot hear my own voice over the rushing in my head.

“Rasha,” I shout, hoping she will hear me even if I cannot. “Where is Tariq?”

She strolls into the room, wiping sleep from her eyes. She throws a bright shawl over her shoulders as she approaches the window. “What are you talking of, Qasim? He is asleep in his bed, as you should be. Are you dreaming?” She touches my arm to wake me, but I am not sleepwalking.

I jerk my arm away from her and tear to Tariq. There he is, his arms stretched out over his head, his chest exposed, rising and falling, rising and falling in gentle, early morning slumber. Rasha comes round me, alarmed herself now, and runs her hands through Tariq’s thick hair, assuring herself that I am the mad one. “You see, Qasim? He is here. Nothing is wrong.”

“An explosion jarred me awake. It sounded close.”

“I heard nothing.”

I blink my eyes; in fact, all is silent except for the chirp of some distant insect.

Perhaps it was a dream.

I sit on the edge of Tariq’s bed and rub my eyes, willing myself fully awake. Another explosion rocks the bedroom, sending Tariq’s Matchbox cars careening off his shelf.

“Oh!” Rasha gasps.

I run to the balcony again. Tariq sleeps on. My eyes clear of sleep now, and the full moon sends its rays into the courtyard. I search its dim corners to make certain all is in order.

Something is wrong. What?

A huge gash of terror rips through me. I realize that the mortar is missing. I stumble back, half in dread of what is to come, half because its disappearance makes no sense. *Who would make off with a dud, other than a child?*

I rush toward the front balcony, stumble over a broken vase that the explosion has jarred to the floor, curse, run back to my room for my lantern, and then head back to the balcony. It seems seconds have turned to hours. I vow silently never to have this threat of time hanging over me again. Moonlight spills over the balcony reminding me of long ago, the present more of a dream than the past. How strange that such beautiful light can still pour over a world where one's dreams are filled with the sound of explosions, where children bring home weapons instead of kittens, and where snipers hide in every shadow the moon caresses. I stand, letting my eyes adjust to the brightness.

Then I see him. Ahmed is pulling the dud up the alleyway across from us on an oxcart without any beasts hitched to it. His white nightshirt trails behind him in the dust. *He must have completely lost his senses.* Perhaps the explosions are getting to him. I want to call out to him, to make certain he is not sleepwalking, but I know that any sound could draw sniper fire. We are not in the usual lines of fire, but I cannot chance our safety tonight. "Go get something I can throw to warn Ahmed," I order Rasha. She scuttles away.

I wait, feeling my breath becoming shorter. Still no sound except the wheels of his oxcart on gravel. He is out of my line of vision. He must be at the corner of the neighborhood. "Rasha!" I hiss, "Where are you?" Nothing.

I see a flare light up the sky; I feel rather than hear the swish of it. “Rasha!” Nothing.

Suddenly, Tariq is there beside me, pulling on my pajama elastic. “Baba?” he gets out, and then the whole world rocks.

We cannot breathe. I feel myself pick Tariq up in my arms and carry him toward the center hallway, away from this infernal suffocation. *What could this possibly be? Some sort of gas?* I strip my pajama shirt off and cover Tariq’s face with it, commanding him to take a few shallow breaths. I run and get my tie and wrap it around his head. Please God, let me keep him safe! Rasha is here by this time, and the servants come running up the staircase. I suppose she went to get them to throw something *for* her.

I grab all the clothes I can carry from my dresser. We race downstairs to the pantry, crowd into it, and I cover any cracks that would let in air with the clothes I have brought with us. Only then do I take my shirt from Tariq’s face. He is breathing hard, but uninjured. “Baba,” he chides me. “Were you trying to smother me in there?”

Outside I hear chaos. Screams from all around, and a particularly high-pitched screech, which could only be from someone who is wounded. Sirens call out from every direction.

“Must have been a live phosphorus shell,” a servant mutters.

I ruffle Tariq’s hair in relief. “Sit down, everyone. We must stay here until we get the all-clear in the morning.” I still do not know if the shell exploded or a mortar hit somewhere in our neighborhood.

Phosphorus. What does all of this mean? All this time a phosphorus shell has been gathering dust in our courtyard? Why did Ahmed decide to drag it off when the crossfire began? Old Ahmed, our friend, our neighbor, who would not have hurt a flea. I banish the word “spy” from my mind. Perhaps he was a confused old man who had finally reached his limit. Perhaps he

was sleepwalking. Perhaps he was dragging the shell away so it wouldn't be hit in the crossfire. Perhaps I will see Ahmed in the morning and bid him peace, express my gratitude. Phosphorus sticks to whatever it hits and burns, setting it perpetually on fire. My mind cannot help but fixate on an image of old Ahmed lying burnt—still burning—and disintegrating in the road outside our neighborhood, his glassy eyes staring out into the cold morning light. *Will we ever see him again?*

No matter the outcome of this terrible night, one thing is certain. It is unsafe here, and it is best to get out while we can.

I turn to Rasha. I feel my face tighten, ready for my own form of war. I am stone; I cannot be cajoled or swayed. "I am taking the job," I tell her. "You and Tariq are coming with me."

DIANNA

Chapter Two

Engagement

February 13, 1981, Lebanon

Lebanon's leaders adopt security measures to protect its embassies after the kidnapping of Jordan's charge d'affaires in Beirut. Snipers paralyze traffic between East and West Beirut.

February 13, 1981, New York City

Dianna scans the bar through strobe-lit smoke. A haze casts a film on the room's mirrored walls, hung to give the illusion of space.

Dianna hopes a night of companionship will prevent another night of reckless eating. She's dragged her colleague Sophia along to delude herself that she's here for some reason other than finding a man to fill her emptiness for a while. She wears a purple-and-navy Evan-Picone skirt with one pleat in front and a cream sweater. She's pulled her hair back from her forehead as her mother always advised. She recently bought new pumps, too tight, to give the illusion of height. Proper business attire, which belies her mission.

"Are you sure this is where you want to be tonight?" Sophia waves her elegant hand through the smoke and lights a cigarette. She feels a pang of guilt for dragging Sophia here. Two decades older, Sophia is more fairy godmother than buddy.

"Sorry," is all Dianna shouts over the din and shrugs. She catches her stomach sticking out ever so slightly in one of the mirrors and takes a deep breath to pull it in.

"Dianna, I'm afraid can't stay much longer," Sophia says.

Doubting she has the courage to stay here alone, Dianna ponders her options. She looks up at the scum-covered ceiling and asks for inner strength. The subway will close soon, and she has no car.

Then she sees him.

He wears a European suit. An expensive watch with a black face and gold hands glints on his right wrist. Not much taller than she, but wiry, he seems at once exotic and familiar: olive skin graces distinct, proportionate features. His dark hair reminds her of her mother's, and his graceful stance, her father's. He moves with a purposeful gait, arms relaxed, head tilted slightly to the right. He seems part of a world she has yet to experience.

The man circles her, moving through the crowd, around chatting couples, each time drawing nearer, until he stands before her, touching her forearm. "Have you seen a woman...?" he begins.

Dianna misses the rest of his sentence because of the blaring music, his accent, and the word "woman." *He could be fibbing to make himself appear less threatening. Or maybe he has been stood up.* A half-minute passes before she relaxes and replies. "Look around you," she says and laughs. "Women everywhere. What did she look like?"

He moves in closer and speaks directly into her ear so she can hear him. Dianna shivers as she catches a whiff of his cologne. Her eyes catch his. With his tailored suit and self-possessed energy, he almost fits right in. Yet his eyes betray him. This man has suffered. She knows all about pretending. She's hooked.

"She has shoulder-length brown hair," he says. Then, "Never mind—how could you ever identify her?" He waves his arm upward in dismissal. His eyes shift away.

Sophia taps her shoulder, a silent question. Can she leave? Dianna wants her to stay, to keep her safe, and she almost follows her out the bar door. Her pulse thumps heavy in her neck. Then she gestures Sophia homeward and follows the man to the bar. She came here to meet a man, after all.

“What’s your pleasure?” he asks.

She sighs—she will not have to spend her last few dollars to buy her own drink.

“Hello,” he says, extending a well-groomed hand, as though he wants her to examine it.

“My name is Qasim. And you are?” His fingers bear no ring.

“Hello. I’m Dianna. Thank you for the drink.” Her hand lingers in his warm, dry palm for a moment before he lets it drop. Then she makes herself busy stirring the swizzle stick in her gin and tonic, squeezing the lime in.

“That’s a beautiful ring,” he says. “Your school ring?”

Dianna gazes at the green stone with a pang of pride. She doubts this man wants to hear much about her college days or the job that put her through school. “Yes,” she replies.

“You work around here?” He takes a sip of his Scotch and looks around the bar, as if he might not get an answer.

She crosses her legs and steadies herself with her heel on the rung of the bar stool, and then she replies, “Yes, at the Metropolitan. And you?”

“The U.N.”

She raises her brows. “Ah, what do you do?”

He squirms on his seat before answering, and his eyes shift to the floor, then up at her face. “Oh, merely the regular diplomatic paper pushing. Have you been working at the Met long?”

His gaze makes her measure her words. “No, I moved here a year ago. This is my first job after graduation.” Dianna smiles broadly, a vain attempt to closet her small-town naiveté.

“I’ve wanted to live here since I was a child.” She stops, not wanting to reveal more of herself to a stranger.

He seems to read her thoughts. “I am from Lebanon. When I was growing up, I too, wanted to live in New York someday. I always had a fascination with the Statue of Liberty. An American soldier once gave me a tiny replica.” He smiles, and she feels its real warmth. She relaxes and smiles back.

He clears his throat and adjusts his tie. “Do you know anyone from there?”

Her brain searches for her parents’ friends’ name and retrieves it: the Damuses.

Qasim beams and moves his bar stool closer. “The Met must be a wonderful place to work.” He leans toward her.

“Oh, it has its ups and downs. I’m just a cataloger.” Dianna feels a dreaded blush creep up her face. If only she could hide her emotions more.

“That’s an important position for someone as young as yourself.” He must have caught her blush, and he wants to make her feel better. His empathy tugs at her heart, and she leans toward him.

“I needed a job, and I wanted to be in New York.” She blushes again; she hasn’t procured the job she wants yet.

He ignores her embarrassment. “I’m here tonight celebrating!” He claps his hands together without sound.

“Oh.” Dianna looks around for his companions but finds none. She wonders what he means—celebrating alone must be unusual, even in other countries. Perhaps the woman he was meeting was going to celebrate with him.

“I received my Ph.D. this week. I defended my dissertation yesterday.”

“Congratulations!” Dianna pivots toward him on her bar stool. She feels a tinge of her own empathy for this man, who must search for someone with whom to celebrate his life

achievements. She uncrosses her legs, and the bar stool tips a bit with the movement. He reaches across to steady it. “What did you get it in?”

“Global Studies,” he replies, those eyes measuring her reaction. She takes care with her response. She surmises his self-image is linked to his education.

“So you will miss school?”

“Yes.” His eyes cloud, as though remembering all the classrooms, books, and grades. “I will miss it in many ways. Education is very important.”

“Yes, I’ll return once I have some money put aside,” she says. “I’d also like to travel.” She goes on to talk about the places that beckon her, forgetting her responsibilities in America. She begins with her chief lures, Paris and Venice, and continues well into her fantasies—African safaris and a cruise around the Greek islands. She’s careful not to mention any place in the Middle East, lest he think she’s hinting at a future trip with him.

“I can understand the desire to travel. To some of us, it is more than a desire; it is a need. I myself will always need to learn and travel.”

“Yes, me too. That’s why I came to this bar.”

His laugh is like a tightrope wire, showing one crooked front tooth in a row of otherwise perfect, straight ones. He has caught her joke. The bartender brings two fresh drinks. Qasim takes one long gulp of his first Scotch and hands the bartender his empty glass. Dianna sips, wishing she had a better threshold for alcohol. She looks away, pretending to study the top-shelf bottles in front of them, feeling his gaze moving across her body. A ripple of excitement pulses through her. The alcohol is doing its job.

She has heard that diplomats listen more to what is *not* said than what *is*. She hopes he can’t discern that she almost didn’t complete college. She needs to support her mother—the

mother who would have beaten her for being in this bar, let alone with a foreign man. No matter, her mother was in no condition to harm anyone these days. Funny how shame persisted; she should think of a joke about that.

Yet her discomfort dissipates with every word they exchange. She's surprised by this man's awareness of her, how he seems to hang on her words, and she becomes more at ease as he tells her of his country, his work, and when asked, about himself. Their surroundings become more raucous, but Dianna doesn't notice. This man, this Qasim, listens. Someone is listening to her.

He suggests escaping the rising noise and smoke to grab some Chinese food. "You've had Chinese, right?" he asks, and Dianna wonders if he's joking.

"Of course," she replies, her pride stiff. She goes to a pay phone to call her housemate Leah, and all she finds at the other end is an incessant busy signal. The phone eats her change.

The outside air smells of snow. They ransom his car, a late-model bottle-green Buick sedan from one valet, only to relinquish it to another ten minutes later. Qasim opens the door for her, helps her with her jacket, and orders for her. She will not remember the name of the delicious food they savor. Not so the conversation. She relishes every word he speaks, and his rapt eyes show she has his attention. Dianna marvels at the rarity of this bar-room-encounter-turned-date. Yet they linger, chatting about work, joking about chopsticks, bantering about Reaganomics and the new shops on Fifth Avenue. When the waiter brings tea and fortune cookies, Qasim offers her one, running his finger along the back of her hand. She shivers, unsure if she's feeling excitement or trepidation, but certain he has noticed.

Perhaps this is the beginning of something, Dianna muses, and instantly snuffs the hope. What would he see in her anyway? This man is probably only here for a year or two since he has his degree, and she has a plan to remain uninvolved.

Qasim unfurls his fortune like a tiny scroll, glances at it, and then stuffs it in his jacket's breast pocket. The two movements—the first fluid, the second abrupt—bemuse her. It must not have been favorable. She slips her own minute piece of paper out of its broken shell, reading three inapplicable words: “HE IS LOYAL.” She tosses the paper onto the tablecloth. Dianna does not believe in Chinese cookie fate.

“What did yours say?” She grins, Cheshire-like, and leans toward him.

“Dianna's future shines bright,” he says.

Though she knows this is a line, she doesn't care. “That's very kind.”

“Fortune cookie, very wise, very accurate,” he quips, and she giggles. “Do that again,” he says, and his voice trembles.

“I can't perform on command,” she says, but she giggles in spite of herself. “Really, what did it say?”

“Are you mocking me?” he asks and chucks her under her chin.

“No, just curious,” she says, pulling his hand back and balancing her chin on his knuckles. She wants the sensuous sting of his touch to last. “What does your future hold?”

“I'll tell you later,” he replies, motioning for the check. The check in hand, he writes a note on it, and then heads for the Gents.' Dianna succumbs to the temptation of reading it. It's a couple of sentences of gratitude in crisp, cropped script underneath a generous tip. She feels a bit chastened by her curiosity.

Upon Qasim's return, Dianna pushes back her chair, and he rushes to pull it all the way out for her. They stand there for a moment gazing at each other. Somewhere between dumplings and fortune cookies, they struck a silent pact. They are going to be together tonight. The bill settled, Qasim takes her to his home.

"What township do you live in?" she asks, hoping he hasn't noticed she isn't certain where they are.

He gives a name she has never heard of, and then he adds, "In case you haven't figured it out, we're going to New Jersey." His eyes twinkle, professorial, not the least malignant or patronizing. She's sure he's noticed her discomfort, and he is trying to allay her fears.

The last time she was in Jersey was with a man who bit her tongue when she wouldn't let him go any further. She wonders at the contrast of that night and this one. The lights of the city glimmer from across the river as they traverse the George Washington Bridge, and Qasim takes her hand. A few minutes later, they pull into a two-car garage, attached to a stately brick colonial and enter a table-space kitchen that gleams of white walls and stainless steel. Walking ahead of her, Qasim flicks on light switches. Each room displays a carpet more unusual than the previous one. He turns on every lamp in his den to show off the rug in there.

"Stand on the north side," Qasim urges.

Dianna gasps in admiration. "It's a completely different color from the south than from the north."

His expression turns gentle, relaxed. He loosens his tie, sits back on the sofa, and pats the seat. She joins him. They kiss—a simple but promising kiss. His lips are full and warm, a tad rough, and she wants to continue discovering them.

When he asks her to his bedroom, without prelude, she accepts, though for a moment, she wants to run. His differences that drew her in stand between them like a fortress wall. She is uncertain what she wanted from this night. She had wanted him notice her; she did not mean for this man to move her as he has.

She follows him, off-kilter, remembering the last time she saw Danson, in a cemetery of all places. She remembers how the sun bounced off the etched stones, the crinkle of his leather jacket during their last hug, the rough texture of his fingers as he pulled away. No one has piqued her interest since. She's entertained some mediocre dates, even some flings, but nothing compared to tonight. She knew what was going to happen before she even decided to show up. She doesn't know if she wants Danson's image to remain or retreat. The image finally decides for itself.

As simple as his living room is elegant, Qasim's bedroom has bare walls, an armoire, a bed, a hard wooden chair. They strip off their business clothes: the ties, the tweed, the pantyhose that separate them. He urges her down onto the crisp linens of a king-sized bed. *Might he have a wife?* She locks this seed of doubt away for later. Sex is the one time she can let go.

Dianna looks scientifically at Qasim's body, as she does all men, deciding what pleases her: his curly black hair, meticulously trimmed, his scrupulous nails on long fingers, the curve of his mouth, the deep scar on the right side of his cheek, the baby-fine hair that hides most of his silken skin. His physique does not draw upon the depth of her passion; his eyes are her focal point. They remind her of a deep well of water.

He caresses her—her legs, her knees, the arch of her back, the hollow of her throat, the notch under her chin. Without hesitating, his hands glide fluidly over the red indentation that her skirt hook made. Dianna reflects on this only for a moment. She is drunk with gin and too much

pent-up desire. She lets herself go. She takes herself down, down, down, murmuring that she does not do this often, not second-guessing herself or how he will react to her abandon. They fall into rhythm, and it becomes a dance. Later, the second guesses will come. For now, she is free, and he follows her.

He is speaking another language. It pours out of his mouth like steamy tea. Dianna is wistful, even in passion, that she cannot understand what he says to her. He interrupts the stream of words now and again with an English exclamation. He calls her “beautiful.” He says it with an inflection of awe and surprise, as if he had been afraid of discovering some grave, cloaked imperfection that would destroy his first impression. She turns her head away, sadly, simply. She does not think of herself as beautiful.

She senses that Qasim notices her dismissal, the negative incline of her head. He takes his hand away, tentatively, for an instant. Her slight, dubious gesture hangs in the air like a “no” that has actually been spoken. It comes between them—a small echo of air—enough to let him know he holds the better hand.

Chapter Three

Telecommunications

Dianna wakes to find Qasim on the phone, speaking rapid-fire Arabic, sometimes looking across the room, sometimes looking down. He laughs frequently, even in the middle of words. His laughter is quite the contrast to his punctuated speech—like water running over pebbles—melodious yet complex, complicit and implicit, not altogether a laugh of goodwill, yet infectious. When he hangs up, he doesn't share any details from the conversation with her. She wants to know but doesn't ask. It's too soon to meddle in his private business.

She's feeling a pang of remorse. She's never stayed with someone the night she met them, and he's so much older than she. In spite of her entry-level job, she's on a career track. She's finally sending some money home. She shouldn't have been so open. She shouldn't have had anything to drink.

Yet as she watches Qasim move about the room, she begins to relax again into the magic they shared last night. *He certainly doesn't seem to be feeling any regret.* He's busy tidying up the room, humming a tune that's a little off key, folding the crease in his trousers, picking up her belongings from the floor and putting them in the chair beside the closet. He pulls a white terry robe out of his closet and places it on the bottom of the bed for her to wear. Then he chucks her under the chin. "Good morning," he says. "Ready for some breakfast?" He tells her to stay in bed. When he brings in a tray with tea and toast, her heart lifts.

"Mmmm. I can tell you're a bachelor. But thanks for the thought," she teases.

He laughs with her, that same, delicious, infectious laugh. "I am actually a gourmet chef. I don't have time to buy the food." And he sits down at her feet.

“You’ll have to show me those skills some time,” she says before she realizes that seeing one another again is an assumption they might not share.

Yet he reaches over the sheets and takes her hand. She settles back against the pillow in relief. “Any coffee in that gourmet kitchen of yours?”

“Well...” his eyebrows arch up in contemplation.

“Oh, I have to be a good girl to get coffee?” she teases. He clears his throat, and she can’t understand why he’s uncomfortable. “It’s okay if you don’t have any coffee,” she reassures him.

“It is not that,” he says, still holding her hand, but shifting his position. “It is that I only have what you would call ‘Turkish’ coffee. That is too strong for you, no?”

Dianna insists she wants Turkish coffee, not weak tea. When he leaves to make it, she opens his closet a crack to see if it contains plenty of pressed shirts, jackets, pants, and ties, but nothing remotely feminine. Then she calls her housemate and best friend to let them know her adventure, and her safety. Leah isn’t home, but Heather answers.

“You won’t guess where I am,” Dianna says in a mock whisper.

“The bookstore,” Heather guesses.

“Standing in the home of Dr. Qasim el-Kafry,” Dianna says with a giggle.

“Who?” Heather cries.

Dianna leans back in Qasim’s comfortable, ornate chair, bouncing on the springs to test it out. “I met him last night. His rugs look different from every angle.”

“So you must have had fun.”

“Oh, yes!” Dianna hears the enthusiasm in her own voice.

“Well, it’s about time,” Heather says.

“Time for what?”

“Time you got over that jerk Danson! But an Arab?”

Dianna studies the books on Qasim’s coffee table, one in English, the other in Arabic, both textbooks. An annoyance creeps in. “I suppose so.”

“Where’s he from, so I can be sure?” Heather asks.

“Lebanon.”

“All Lebanese are Arab,” Heather says with authority.

Dianna starts to argue, to defend Qasim against Heather’s tone, but stops at the fall of his footsteps. “I’ve got to go,” she tells Heather.

“Be careful, Cinderella.”

The opposite corner of the Persian’s colors convey a hint of a particular and familiar, shade of peach—a Georgia Belle peach, like the peaches her father would peel for her from his family farm every summer. *It’s too soon to know what will happen next*, after she rises from the chair, after her clothes are on, after he drives her to her apartment. She smiles at him, full of young womanhood. Qasim smiles back at her.

Then she follows him to his all-white kitchen, surprised by its light and space. She’s never seen Arabian coffee made. His pot boasts engraved flowers and diamonds covering it from spout to base. The spout sticks out in a crescent shape.

“No sugar, please,” she requests.

“Mostly cardamom,” he says. “If you add spice, you seldom need sugar.”

The bronze pot resembles the Arabian lamps she knows from childhood fairy tales. If she were still a child, she’d imagine the spices he adds to be some sort of magical brew. The pot seems to have traveled from another world entirely. She picks it up to pour and sees an Arabic inscription underneath.

“What does it say?” she asks.

“To Qasim El-Kafry. Best Wishes from H.E. Dr. Mohammed El-Sadi.”

“H.E.?”

“His Eminence. Dr. El-Sadi is a former minister from Qatar.”

“You mean clergy?” She furrows her brow.

“No, no, Dianna. Minister of Transportation.”

She blushes, feeling schoolgirl foolish. “Oh,” she says, rubbing her fingernail along the rim of the pot. Her Southern mother would not approve of her social blunders and naïve questions. Yet neither would she approve of Dianna being in an Arab man’s robe.

“I told you I was a gourmet chef,” he says. “My family has many happy customers. They’ve remained friends. That is the way in my part of the world.”

“So they gave you coffee pots?” she asks, still perplexed.

“A token of affection.” He pauses. “I have added to the collection in other ways.”

Another pause. “It truly is no matter. Come here, you,” he says, and pulls her over to the round table near the window where the sun streams in.

She takes a sip from her cup. He compliments her on not making a funny face while making a funny face himself, puckering his lips in mock distaste. The nubby fabric of his robe caresses her skin. She rubs her cheek against its collar, and he brushes her other cheek, once only, with the back of his hand. No words. His touch tells her he somehow understands her, accepts her.

His neighbor has a bird feeder, and the late morning sun creates a kaleidoscope of color around a gathering of birds—jays, cardinals, even a goldfinch. The feeder itself is painted red, the color of the one her father built her when she was eight. How she wishes she had more

memories like that, but he was always moving, and moving them. Unsurprisingly, his death had come without warning, stealing any hope that she'd live in a real home, instead of a house. Still less hope that she could make her own home, her own life, with an ill mother and two siblings to provide for. The birds flutter up. She tries to find some perceived threat in the trees beyond her viewpoint, and a red feather falls onto the new-fallen leaves.

He's staring at her when she looks back at him. He moves toward her with that distinguished, floating gait she admired last night, and his kiss is long and powerful. When he pulls back, he looks appraising, uncertain, as if he too felt last night might be a dream that might not linger. They look out the window together.

"About time I got dressed," she says.

He still looks pensive, but he takes a breath. "If you must," he says, as he walks over and begins doing dishes. She grasps the tiny, white, porcelain handle-less coffee cup in both her hands, and chugs it down to the grounds.

Chapter Four

A Geography Lesson

On Dianna and Qasim's first true date, they rendezvous at an upscale pizzeria. They stand in a serpentine line, their breath blowing smoke through unseasonably cool air. The pavement shines with a rainbow of slick moisture from a storm that blew through minutes before. Qasim jumps up and down, pounding his feet on the pavement to keep warm.

"I was not made for this climate," he grimaces. "I wish I'd worn an overcoat."

Dianna smooths his wind-blown hair and notices the lights blink on at the top of the Chrysler Building. She glances at her watch. "It's later than I thought."

"Really? What time is it?" He hasn't noticed the city lights at all.

"Closing in on seven-thirty."

"It's getting dark earlier."

"No, the days are lengthening. We were supposed to be here at five-thirty to beat the rush."

"Oh, come now; it doesn't matter. I like the dusk, even if it comes early here."

She wants this date to be like their first meeting, full of giggling and exploration. She's spent two weeks imagining where he'd take her. Dancing? A show? What they'd talk about. Music? Politics? What would happen after they turned the lights out later.

In answer, more city lights twinkle on around them, and the cool air whips around her coat, dampening her daydream. She is amazed at how quickly she started to feel again, with intensity devoid of resignation, she who does not believe in fate. His devoted attention the day

they spent together has her desire heightened. They've kept in touch with short, pithy phone conversations, but she sometimes has trouble with the way he runs phrases together.

He's whistling, like he's wishing away the cold. She still marvels at how familiar he feels in spite of his foreignness. The phone conversation has been full of wit and innuendo. Tonight, though, brings back memory of his touch and that depth of attention that he gives her, as if she's the only person he knows. It makes him feel almost like family, though she wonders if perhaps he acts this way with everyone. She's sure his charm must make everyone feel special. Yet as she seizes on this thought, he squeezes her hand, and there's that connection again.

How can he breed this familiarity in her? She's uncertain but wants to keep exploring. The fire behind his eyes is familiar, matching some unknown force within her, impatient to be born. Never before has she seen someone who echoes her hopes and hurts in this profound manner, with no words spoken.

"If talk is silver, then silence is gold," he says, though he looks like he knows what she's thinking.

"I'd love to do what you do," she answers.

"Be grateful, young Dianna. You are here in the land of the free, working at the nation's best museum!" He gives her shoulders a squeeze.

"You could at least tell me about it. What do you do when you travel?"

"I get people who don't want to agree to reach a compromise," he answers.

"So you're a peace mediator!"

"That's an idealistic way of putting it, my dear. More like getting people to share their toys on the playground."

"You establish trust, then. That must lead to peace!"

“It does to some fragile degree.”

“You sit in negotiations all day? You don’t get to see the countries you visit?”

“Not really.”

“Well, I want to travel. Surely there’s a way to balance travel and peace. Seems to me travel brings peace, at least inner peace.”

“Let me know when you find it, Miss Dianna. Let me know if you find a way to dip your toes in the sea as well.”

A tall, well-dressed American couple catches her attention, interrupting her intended response. The man has his arm draped around the woman. They move past the trattoria, obviously disinterested in pizza. Yet the man does a double take, motioning to his partner, and they hesitate for a slight moment, staring in Dianna’s and Qasim’s direction. Dianna discerns a look of veiled disapproval on the man’s fine features. Dianna moves closer to Qasim. She needs to protect him from this bejeweled couple. Qasim puts his arm around Dianna. *Has he noticed too?* Then the couple continues on, leaving Dianna with an unsettled feeling. She hears the muted word “interracial” as they disappear into the night.

Qasim stares in their direction long after the couple moves into the distance.

“You okay?” she asks, and he hugs her close.

“Of course,” he says, but his smile seems forced.

Did I misunderstand what they said? Dianna muses. *Is that what we are—interracial?* She’s conjured up all sorts of other obstacles to a potential relationship with Qasim, but not race; no, not at all. She’s not used to being the object of this sort of judgment. She hides her family’s newfound poverty and her mother’s ill health. That’s what blue bloods—moneyed or not—do.

“One does not pay attention to slights from those who do not have the capacity to comprehend the slightest complexity,” Qasim tells her. Then he changes the subject, starts to talk about the wind, the weather, the hope of approaching spring. They round the corner, and the warmth of the wood pizza ovens spills out the flimsy door onto her cheeks. They are almost inside. She glances at Qasim and finds him studying her. She shifts her eyes to her feet.

“You remind me of a girl I knew in school,” he says and traces her lips, then brings her face up to meet his fixed gaze. “Her cheeks and lips always turned rosy from the least amount of heat.”

She smiles and acknowledges the oblique compliment. “Here we are,” she says when they arrive at the doorway. “Come in before you catch cold.”

“Ladies first,” he redirects and guides her forward. They move like skaters on ice into the warm room with its comfort-food scent and bright noise.

The restaurant is as toasty as the night is chill. Qasim takes her coat and pulls out her chair. She notices he tips well, and he stands up when she goes to the Ladies’ room. They drink lots of red wine and savor their deep-dish pepperoni.

On their second slice, Qasim gets a serious glint in his eye. It worries her, and he takes his time saying anything. She squirms in her chair, not knowing how to keep the conversation going. Finally, he responds to her discomfort. *The man does notice things.*

“I must leave for a while,” Qasim begins.

His face looks like he’d rather stay. “You mean you need to take me home?” she finally asks, knowing that’s not what he means.

“I travel a great deal for work, Dianna. That will continue. If you continue to see me, you must learn to live with it. I will come and go, often with little notice. I hope you will continue

with your friends while I am gone. I would like to continue to see you. I almost did not tell you, but that would be unfair. I want us to get to know one another better and better, yet I will be gone for extended periods.”

Her eyes tear, but she holds them back. “How long?”

He takes her hand across the table. The lights flicker and dim, and loud music begins to blare through the speakers. “Only three weeks.”

“Where?”

“The Gulf. If I can get into Lebanon, I always try to stop there as well.”

They have only just met; they are hardly lovers. So she stops her questions. *Never mind, never mind*, she prods her heart. *You’ll have time later. What’s the rush?*

“Will you send me a postcard?” she asks him instead.

“It is already done.”

She half believes it is so. She imagines a prewritten card lying on his coffee table at home, waiting for him to pick it up and send to her. It’s as though he is already on the airplane, he feels so far away.

Chapter Five

Absence

Dianna enters the museum with a cup of coffee and a bran muffin. Her breath comes ragged because she has run the entire distance. She never oversleeps, but the electricity was off today. Leah promised she'd pay it directly instead of mailing it. She probably will; Leah's curly hair needs electricity for a blowout. Dianna always pays the utilities, but the rate hike this month left her short. The end of the month always includes a hold-her-breath moment to see if she bounces a check or can afford a bill. The Stock Market supposedly rallied today, so maybe the economy is turning around. They've said that before. After taxes, she earns about \$400 a week. Straight out of school, she knows she's lucky to have any job in this recession, and a job in New York City is some sort of miracle, no matter how bored it makes her. Thank God for Leah, whose parents send her a little extra to compensate for Dianna's little extra heading home each month.

She senses Peter Fox's eyes on her as she attempts a subtle glide into her seat. His gaze feels at once disapproving and invasive. She can't tell if he's attracted to her or not, but he certainly does not like her. Her coffee cup lid pops off, and a tiny pool of mocha-colored liquid forms on her desk. She'll have to go get something to wipe it up. Everyone else sits at his and her desks, clacking away at their typewriters, but she knows they've noticed she's late. Peter's the only one to cast his coy glance her way. "I see you," it seems to say. "I know the next promotion is mine, and mine alone." She hears her heart beating out the echo of a dumb blonde joke.

"How many blondes does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

“Eleven.”

“Why eleven?”

“One bleached blonde to do the work and ten real blondes to learn how it’s done.”

She shivers in indignation. It is difficult to live in a world that judges intelligence and sensuality on hair color. She wants to say something indignant to Mr. Fox, but the department’s vice president, Mr. Grant, only allows conversation during the day’s two breaks. Sophia has seen the shiver, though, in addition to the coffee spill, so she rescues her with a tissue dug from her bottomless desk drawer of necessary office items, in her usual maternal manner.

Dianna looks over her shoulder and nods a small glance of thanks. Then she looks down at her work and breakfast, now cold and soggy. She throws the muffin in the trash and pulls out typing paper and today’s stack of little green cards. She’s a cataloguer, which requires a certain modicum of intellect, but also immense patience. The cards need the same description typed on them multiple times, and carbon paper has no effect on index cards.

“BRONZE AGE. (said to be from) Cyprus: Faience vase in form of a male head. Circa 1250 (?) – 1400 BC. Cat no. 19.14.73.”

The first card always makes her mind work and breeds hope, yet the last card in any fifteen-card series leaves her exhausted. How she’d love to research this vase more, to find out who it is on the vase, the details of his story. They aren’t even sure of the place and date it was crafted!

These days her boredom allows her mind to wander to Qasim. She wonders where he’s traveling today. She knows he had multiple stops but forgot to ask where they were in his three-week voyage. He’s probably forgotten all about the postcard; he’s always so busy.

When she thinks of him, she sees desert and wind, but he told her he grew up by the Mediterranean. She needs to find out more about the Arab world, especially about Lebanon. It's been in the news due to conflict, not geography.

At last, her break begins. She fishes her muffin out of her otherwise empty trashcan and heads downstairs, outside, where no one can see that her appetite has gotten the best of her. She'll start by reading the paper, and if that yields little information, she'll head to the New York City Library. She sits on the front steps of the museum, trying to sit in the one beam of early spring sunlight to stay warm.

The breeze whips the paper about in her hands, and in the twenty minutes she has to read, the only information about Lebanon focuses on fighting in a southern city there. She'll need to find a map. She turns to national, then local, news. There's an op-ed about the fuel hike and a full-length article about Reagan's "protectionist" policies. Some West German leader has said Reagan will start an infinite spiral of international trade war if he sets import quotas on Hondas and Toyotas. She rolls her eyes. She, and most people her age, adore Toyotas. She doubts Reagan can stop this economic tour de force, let alone topple the global economy, all by himself. It's much more likely fuel will have an effect on the economy than Reagan. Her country needs to realize it must play its part in a much larger world.

She beats the rest of her coworkers back to her desk, and feeling sated and excited about learning more about the man who's opened up this new vista, she types away all afternoon, her pile of little green cards becoming two piles, then three. Sophia sends a green card with a gold star and a little note over her shoulder at 4:45 pm. "Great work, Dianna, goddess of the green card!" Dianna chuckles and covers her typewriter to head for home. Then she gives Sophia a

good-bye hug of gratitude. What would she do without her in this dim, windowless basement she inhabits forty-plus hours a week?

The bus breaks down two blocks into its journey, sputtering malignant fumes as the driver cranks the engine, leaving her and other riders coughing. She decides to walk home. It will be faster than waiting for another bus. The leonine March wind bites around her wool skirt and through her stockings at her knees. The streets reek of urine and garbage in the one block she must pass through—a block that is going through gentrification, but still has many boarded, bedraggled buildings resembling crack houses. Walking faster makes the wind bite harder. She needs a car. At least that will give her some freedom. Maybe she could move to New Jersey, where it's cheaper.

The card drops through her mail slot a few minutes after she's entered her place. Leah's not home yet. It's dated the second date of his trip, but she's receiving it two afternoons before Qasim's scheduled return. She almost misses it because it's wedged between two pieces of junk mail. It shows a swimming pool with a cabana next to it. Palm trees instead of sand dot the terrain around the pool. She turns it over to see what he's written, reveling in the short sentences, the closely cropped script, the clipped verbiage bereft of prepositions:

Dear Dianna,

I arrived Riyadh last week. It is very warm here. I arrive Cairo

tomorrow. Here I am really very busy. I will see you soon. Really.

Love, Qasim

She wonders what the small squeezed letters would look like if they were transformed into Arabic. She files this new information under "Handwriting" in a mental compartment devoted solely to this new man who is both lover and mystery. She has other filed items, gleaned from

her dates with Qasim: he is wealthy, although she does not know how he acquired it. His expatriation seems not entirely of his choosing. He is a Muslim. He likes jazz. He likes her skirts to cover her knees. He does not like movies, but he loves literature. He is both a gentleman of the old school, yet relaxed and casual, even in a three-piece suit. He's witty and loves to laugh. He discusses politics one night, only to be indifferent to it the next. He seems well versed in every subject she's brought up.

She wants to know more.

Dianna sticks the postcard within the pages of a picture book on the Middle East she picked up in a thrift store. Although the book contains vivid photos, she wonders about the accuracy of their representation: dhows on small aqua waves, alfalfa fields, minarets, prostrate men on prayer rugs, and women behind black hoods, which make her even more curious about what they look like. Are they beautiful? Wise? Full of joy or sadness? She searches their eyes for clues and finds none. They are, after all, only plain coverings, like scarves or shawls. Yet, she is a person who needs to see what lies behind the curtain. She wants to know more. To know more, she will have to travel there and meet them.

Chapter Six

Rules of Conduct

They're traveling at a solid clip, Qasim's right hand on Dianna's knee, his left on the steering wheel, heading toward Wall Street to catch a ferry to Sandy Hook. Perhaps he also wants to make up for the afterthought of a gift he brought her, a souvenir from the airlines. She's hopeful, yet practical, trying not to fall in love hard, like she did the last time.

Qasim returned tanner and brighter, with a new Rolex on his wrist. He catches her skeptical expression, and his brow forms lines of concern. "You would rather not go to the sea today, Dianna?" he asks.

The skepticism recedes. She can't let her history or regret get in the way of what today brings. She's seen Sandy Hook from afar a few times and longed to go there. Plus, it's not quite warm enough to sit by the seaside, and she wonders why he'd want to go if not for her benefit.

"I was thinking perhaps it would be too chilly for you there. That's all." His warm hand covers her own completely.

"I miss the sea so, my dear," he says. "Especially when I return from the Middle East. I failed to dip one toe in the sea while I was there. All I saw was desert." His eyes redden. "I want to get back to my country."

She starts to speak, and if he were not driving with such speed, she would hug him. Instead, she scoots closer and lays her head on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she says.

"War is a difficult thing, but one must go on." He takes a deep breath as though to rid himself of any moodiness. "Better to be cold and by the sea than not by the sea at all."

The sun can't decide if it would rather be in front of or behind the clouds, and it's brisk for this time of year. Yet Qasim certainly is dressed for any weather. She mentally peels the layers that hide his wiry frame. She shivers when she remembers—his? muscles, covered by a furry, masculine chest, covered by a white t-shirt, covered by a button-down, covered by a Ralph Lauren pullover, topped off with an artful tan tweed jacket. He would look like a professor, except that his tweed far outranks an academic's, with a finer weave and more refined design than any off-the-rack sport coat. It has a fine line of teal running through the browns and mustards. She's noticed he dresses like that—conservative yet with his own style. It's so subtle that people not looking for it would think he looked like every other academic in the city. Those willing to take a closer look would soon realize he's cut from different cloth, that he's his own man. Someone who needs to, rather than wants to, fit in.

She cups her other hand over his, and he smiles.

"Do you know your way?" she asks.

"Not really. We're on an adventure."

"What if we end up in Florida?" she teases.

"At least it would be warm."

"And we'd both lose our jobs."

"But we'd have toasty fingers and toes."

"There! The sign!" She waves him over to the ferry lot.

In actuality, she'd rather turn around and keep driving to Florida. She's never been to Florida. There, she'd have time to woo him, and he to court her, and he'd be hers. She wants to spend time with someone who appreciates, no loves, her. Does he love her?

She's never been on a ferry before. It's like entering a cave, full of dampness and oil, and gas fumes. Qasim has taken his hand from her knee, and his eyes dart about as they adjust to the dim lighting. She can hear the boat shift and settle each time a car enters across the gangplank. It's tight, and she wonders how they'll get the car out.

Once they climb a narrow steel staircase up, though, the vista above is as expansive as the car hold below is desolate. The ferry is already heading out over the choppy water, and she can see Battery Park and the bridges up close. Soon the New York City skyline looms in its majesty behind her, the imposing Twin Towers casting a deep shadow across the water.

"Let's go outside," she beckons Qasim, and he pulls on his leather gloves. The ferry is full of every sort of New Yorker, yet she cannot spot one dark-skinned person except for Qasim. Unusual, yet perhaps the other Jersey coast is less integrated than the City.

It's one of those rare smog-free days, and she can see forever. She breathes deep, savoring the salt. She can almost see a lighthouse peering through the shiny sea air in the distance. It's all white, so the sunny background all but obscures it. She can barely make out its red-tipped beacon lamp.

"It's the oldest lighthouse in the States," she tells him. "The British occupied it, but George Washington turned it over to the state."

"Interesting," he murmurs. "You know a lot about New York history."

"I know a lot about lighthouses," she counters.

"Clever girl," he says, and she doesn't even mind if his tone is professorial.

They stand at the railing, pointing at the sights, gulping down the clean sea breeze, hands together to keep Qasim warm. Wind whips his thick hair around, and his face takes on a ruddy

tone beneath its tan. He's never looked so handsome. They admire the ever-changing scenery, free hands gripping the railing as the ferry pitches to and fro.

His body stiffens, and hers follows. They're being watched by two men in down jackets.

"Pay no attention to them," Qasim whispers in her ear. "They're animals, heathens."

She can't help glancing back once. They do look like brutes, and they have foul expressions. *Are they Arab?* The tall one spits in the water. Qasim looks like he wants to spit in the water, but his manners won't allow it. His hand balls into a fist. "Animals," he hisses again under his breath. He takes her arm and guides her into the cabin area. "Do you mind too much?" he asks. "We're almost there."

She's actually relieved, even though all the white faces stare at them, too, more out of curiosity than animosity. The ship's horn blows, and it's time to go back and drive out of the ship's under belly.

"Who were those men?" she asks when they're in the sunlight again. She's afraid he might know them.

"People we should not even deign to discuss," he answers.

She presses on. "So you know them?"

"I know of them, Dianna, sweet," he replies, his lips taut. "I believe you know them as well. People that want to make your decisions for you."

"What?" She frowns in confusion.

"I believe in this country you call them bigots, racists, supremacists? Do not think you have premium on them because of your Civil Rights history. These people are everywhere. People with narrow minds. The secret lies in never letting them believe you think their opinions are just, or that you even acknowledge them."

She smiles in relief. She's been handling those kinds of prejudiced assumptions and misperceptions all her life.

She holds out her hand. "Come on, Qasim. Let's go climb the lighthouse!" When she looks back, the men are on the deck staring after them.

--END EXCERPT--

