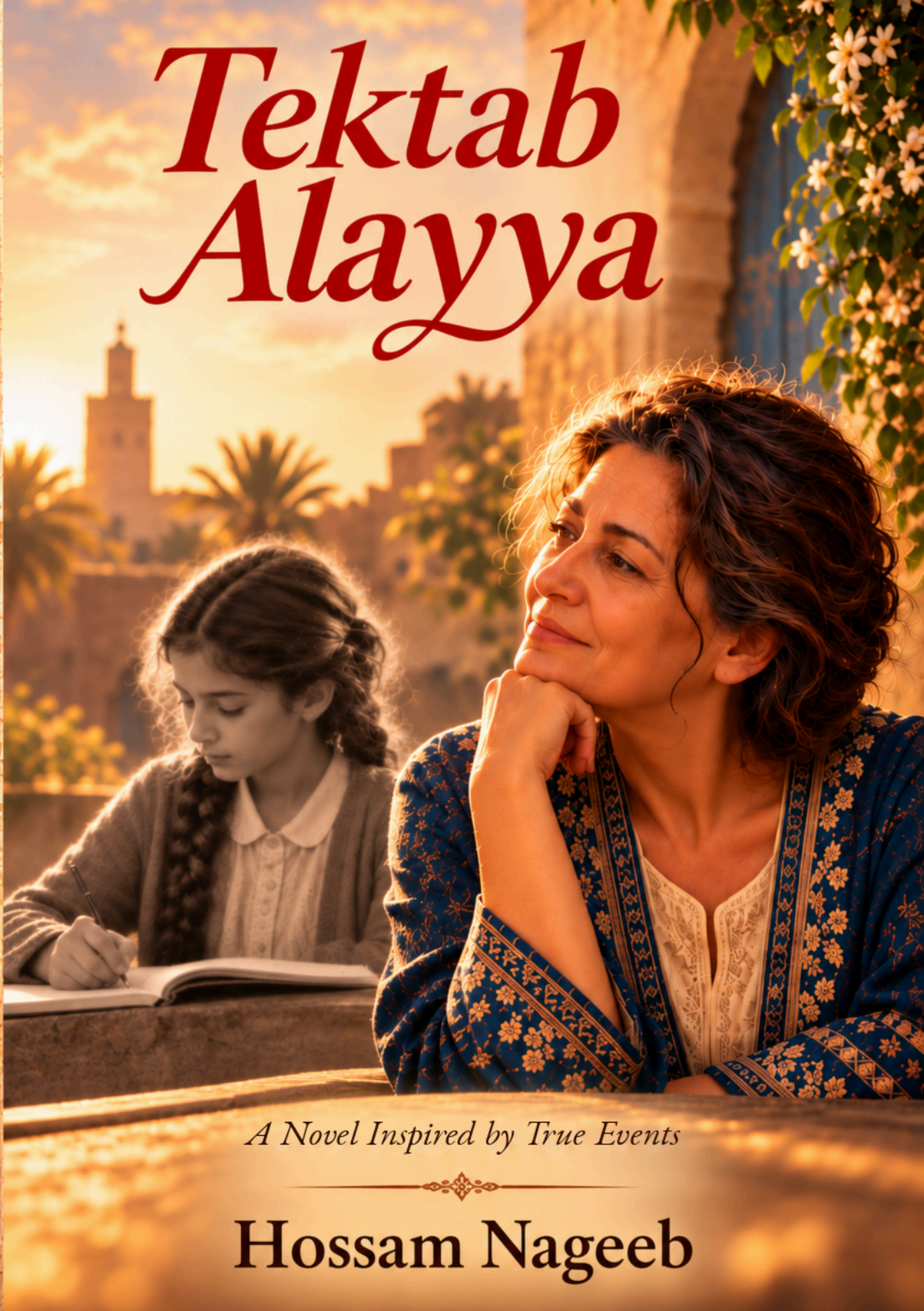
Tektab Alayya
A Novel Inspired by True Events
Hossam Nageeb

TEKTAB ALAYYA

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HOSSAM NAGEEB

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This novel is inspired by real events. Some dialogue and situations have been reconstructed for literary purposes while preserving the essential events on which the work is based.

English-language edition based on the author’s November 2, 2026 Arabic manuscript.

Dedication

To the little girl who carried questions too large for her years and fashioned from her pain a woman who could keep going.

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Prologue: The Unopened Letters

Lubna was about fourteen when she learned that a man had returned to Casablanca from Liberia—and that he knew her father. She had never met him. All that mattered was the slender thread connecting him to the man she missed. The name of the country alone could stir an old hope in her heart: Liberia. Somewhere across the sea, Adel was living his life. His days went on there while hers passed in a household where money had grown scarce and questions remained unanswered.

Her father's absence was nothing new. What was new was that someone had come back from the country he'd disappeared into, someone she could look in the eye and question. Maybe he would tell her Adel was well. Maybe he had brought a greeting, or knew when her father would return. Maybe he even knew why the absence had stretched so long that the family had begun to avoid speaking of him, as if saying his name only reminded them how far away he was.

On her way there, she arranged her questions in her mind. She'd been told the man spoke mostly French, so she called up what little French she knew and repeated her father's name to herself. She wasn't going to ask for money. She wasn't

bringing a letter. All she wanted was news that might reassure her—or one reason she could understand for his long silence.

She entered the jewelry store and found the man seated at his desk, a pair of small glasses perched on his nose. He looked up from his papers, lowered his glasses a little, and said in French, “Oui?”

She hesitated before mentioning her father: Adel, who lived in Liberia.

The man's face changed. He fell silent, placed a ring he'd been holding into its case, and snapped it shut. Then, in Moroccan Arabic, he asked:

“Are you Adel's daughter?”

She nodded. She expected him to ask about her mother and brothers, or at least to smile in a way that suggested news of them had reached their father. Instead, he studied her with an expression she couldn't read. What he said next did more than surprise her. It struck her hard.

“Forget your father. He's forgotten all of you.”

How could a child forget her father? How could she forget the man whose salon she'd entered like a little princess, the man who would put down whatever he was doing to welcome her? How could she forget the person beside whom she'd once felt the world could never hurt her? Those words belonged to no version of him she knew. So she stood there, unable even to protest.

The man began to explain what he had seen in Liberia. He told her about envelopes sent to Adel by his family in Morocco. The letters had arrived, but they remained sealed. He didn't pretend to know what was going on inside her father's mind; he described only what he'd witnessed. Still, the image he left her with stayed for years: letters that had crossed the sea, reached their destination, and then waited for a hand that never opened them. What had they said? Had one of them told him how hard things had become at home, or how much his children missed him? She didn't know. All she knew that day was that the letters had reached him, and he hadn't read them.

She wanted to ask why her father had left the envelopes unopened, but her voice deserted her. Noticing her silence, the man asked whether she had a job. She shook her head. He owned the jewelry store; he gestured around him and told her to come back the next day. She didn't ask what kind of work he had in mind. Her thoughts were still with the letters, and with the words he had spoken.

She went outside. Around her, people moved through their usual routines: shopkeepers called out to customers, pedestrians crossed the street, and life carried on as if nothing had happened. But for her, the world had stopped at one sentence. She walked home hearing it again and again: *Forget your father. He's forgotten all of you.*

When she arrived, she told her mother that the owner of a jewelry store had asked her to come in the following day. She spoke of the possibility of a job but couldn't bring herself to

repeat what the man had said about Adel. She hadn't yet managed to understand the hurt herself. How could she place it in her mother's heart as well?

The evening seemed endless. She sat with her family, listened to their conversations, and answered when someone asked about her day. Yet each time the room fell quiet, she saw the ring being shut inside its box, followed by the image of the unopened letters. In her memory, her father was still the man who had loved and spoiled her. She couldn't make that man fit with what she had learned that afternoon.

In the morning she returned to the jewelry store. She had no idea what the man would ask her to do—or that the doorway she had entered in search of news of her father would lead her into a life far beyond her years.

Chapter One: The Girl from Fez

Oum Kalthoum came from Fez to Casablanca to visit relatives. She wasn't looking for a husband, and she had no idea that the visit would lead her to a home where she would know both happiness and fear. She was a guest in a building where Adel occupied one of the apartments. He was a young barber, known in the neighborhood for his good looks and the pride he took in his work.

Adel saw her. They had never met, and there was no long courtship or secret love affair. He simply went home to his mother and told her he wanted to marry that girl.

“She's the one I want,” he said firmly.

And so began a life whose two principal characters believed, as so many people do at the beginning, that hard work, patience, and good intentions could put the future in order. A home. Children. A livelihood that would grow little by little. Nothing in that first scene suggested that one of those children would someday have to learn how to live without her father.

Adel was a skilled barber. He knew how to welcome a customer and make him want to return. To him, a salon was

more than a chair, a mirror, and a pair of scissors; it was a place where trust was built before hair was cut. Over time his business expanded until he owned a men's salon and a women's salon. From the outside, the family seemed prosperous enough for other people to envy.

Salah was born first, followed by Lubna. Then came Samir, Sharaf, Ahmed, and Mounir. Each child brought new responsibilities, but in Lubna's young eyes home remained inseparable from her father's presence. She knew he owned salons where people came to see him. She could visit him there and watch him as his customers did: a man sure of his craft, a man whom people greeted by name.

She loved those visits. She would pause in the doorway and take in the large mirrors, the chairs, and the unfamiliar faces. She would see her father busy with a customer, and the moment he spotted her, he would turn. His voice would change. He would smile and make room for her beside him. She never had to ask for his attention; he gave it before she could. From her little place nearby, she watched his steady hands and the way he spoke to the men who came through the door. The world beyond their home seemed vast, but her father knew how to move through it. That was enough to make her feel safe.

Adel's delight in his daughter wasn't limited to the salon. Whenever he prepared to go out, she wanted to come along. It hardly mattered where they were headed. What mattered was a seat near him and a stretch of road they would travel together. She told him about school and the small matters

adults seldom considered worth so much attention. He listened, and she returned home feeling that what she had to say mattered.

Sometimes Oum Kalthoum thought her husband indulged his daughter too much. Once, when Lubna wore a short outfit, her mother objected.

“Those clothes are much too short.”

Adel looked at his daughter and answered his wife.

“Let the girl wear what she wants.”

Lubna didn't understand the difference between her parents' views then, but she never forgot how his response made her feel: that he was on her side, and that his presence made the things she feared less frightening. She would grow older and learn that love, however boundless it seems in a given moment, isn't always enough to protect a home.

Salah, the eldest son, was another source of pride. Adel took care with the boy's appearance, sometimes fastening the little bow tie they called a *papillon* around his neck before taking him to the salon. If a customer noticed the boy, Adel's face would brighten, and he would introduce him with the pride of a father who needed no occasion to boast.

“Look at my son.”

Lubna wasn't jealous of the love her father gave Salah. She could see his happiness in her brother, and she knew she occupied a special place in his heart, too. It never occurred to her that the man whose presence reassured her might one day disappear, leaving her to ask strangers for news of him.

But family life wasn't always peaceful. Behind closed doors, arguments between Adel and Oum Kalthoum sometimes grew fierce, then left a heavy silence in their wake. Oum Kalthoum had a sharp temper when she was angry and did not back down easily. During one fight, she seized Adel's shirt and pulled him toward her violently. He made no move in response. He stood before her in silence. The man who spoke confidently to his customers seemed unable, in his own home, either to end an argument or match its fury.

Adel also said that during some of their quarrels, Oum Kalthoum stopped preparing food for him. That was his account of what happened, not an excuse for the choices he made afterward. He began eating away from home. Then he started coming back late, his evenings out and his circle of acquaintances steadily expanding. As he withdrew, Oum Kalthoum was left with the work of caring for the house and children. Each of them would remember those years differently. The children lived with the consequences of the fights without understanding all their causes.

Another woman then entered Adel's life. She bore him a child whom he did not acknowledge at the time. Many years passed before he admitted to his other children that the child was his son. None of these details was known to the children as it happened. But they were part of a life beginning to fracture beyond their sight.

While the salons projected success, unpaid taxes were mounting. Customers came and went; scissors kept moving; mirrors reflected a man who knew his trade. Behind that

orderly appearance, though, bills went unpaid, accounts were deferred, and fear grew as each deadline approached. The crisis did not begin after Adel left Morocco. It was already there while he was still in the country, responsible for his businesses and everything they owed.

Eventually the word *prison* became a real possibility to fear. Adel didn't want to lose what he'd built. He didn't want to stay in a home weighed down by conflict. And he didn't want to face consequences he no longer knew how to avoid.

Around that time, a woman who frequented his salon began telling him about Liberia. She traveled there and knew Lebanese merchants doing business in the country. She spoke of foreigners who had left home in search of better opportunities—and of a trade that could change a man's life almost overnight.

At first, Liberia meant nothing to Adel. Then he heard a single word that lodged in his mind: diamonds. Small stones, some hardly bigger than a bean, could sell for sums he might need years of barbering to earn. He began asking about the traders, the routes, the profits, and what a man starting from nothing would need. Every answer led to another question. Every conversation about diamonds made his own salons seem a little smaller than before.

For Adel, traveling wouldn't simply mean moving from one country to another. Behind him lay a whole life that couldn't be folded into a suitcase with his clothes: the keys to two salons, the names of customers whose appointments he knew

by heart, a wife with whom he no longer knew how to begin a conversation that wouldn't end in an argument, and children who still believed their father could fix anything. It was easier to talk about an opportunity overseas than to explain why the life he'd built with his own hands had become unbearable.

Lubna saw none of this complexity. What did it mean for a father to go far away? She understood short absences: he left for the salon and came back in the evening. She understood standing by the door waiting if he was late. But she knew nothing of an absence that required an airplane, a sea crossing, and a country she couldn't point to on a map. The name sounded strange to her. Even so, she tried to memorize it, as though knowing the name of a place might shorten the distance to it.

In the days before his departure, the household didn't suddenly change its routines. Meals were served at their usual times. The younger children kept fighting and laughing. Oum Kalthoum went on managing the needs of each day. Yet the adults kept returning to the same conversation, lowering their voices whenever one of the children drew near. Mokhtar, Adel's brother, was part of those discussions. He would take charge of the business and make sure money reached the family. On paper, and in the way the men spoke of it, the arrangement seemed solid enough for Adel to leave all those responsibilities behind.

But a promise made between brothers in one room could not, on its own, protect an entire household in another city. The plan depended on things no one had yet tested: the salons

would have to stay busy; old debts would have to be paid; Mokhtar would have to resist the temptation of cash within easy reach; and Adel would have to ask what was happening instead of merely assuming that everything was fine. The children knew none of these conditions. They knew only that their uncle would remain nearby and that their father had said he would come back.

When Lubna told him she would wait for him, she wasn't making a promise as adults understand the word. She was describing something natural in her world: her father would go away for a little while, then reappear. That was why his words—“I won't be gone long”—became more than an answer meant to soothe a little girl. They became a measure against which she would count the years ahead, one after another, until she could no longer remember when the counting had begun.

In those days, Lubna still measured time by what happened between her and her father. If she walked into the salon and found him busy, she waited for him to look up. She didn't need a gift on every visit. It was enough for him to call her over, ask about school, or make a place for her beside him. His attention made her feel that her presence mattered, even among the customers, appointments, and noise. The loss that was coming, then, wasn't only the loss of a man who sent money home. It was the loss of a feeling of safety made up of small gestures that adults rarely notice.

Oum Kalthoum saw things differently. She saw the house in terms of what it needed: food, clothes, money for daily

expenses, children growing older, and a husband who came home late or spoke of opportunities far away. Looking back years later, it would be easy to reduce their marriage to two incompatible personalities. But that didn't explain how a crack could widen through a home day by day. Each believed certain things were necessary. With every new grievance, their conversations grew less able to bring their views together.

The children had no say in these decisions, though they would be affected by them more than anyone. They went about their days as they always had, trusting that grown-ups could manage what children didn't understand. When Adel talked about leaving, he saw a future full of money and success. He could not know that Lubna would remember something else entirely: the car where she waited for him, the salon she entered without fear, and a few words he spoke before his absence stretched beyond anything she could count.

One day, Lubna sat beside him in the car, talking about school as usual. He listened, though his thoughts kept drifting to that distant country. She didn't recognize his distraction as a warning. She had no idea that in his silence her father was weighing the life he'd made with his own hands against another life he'd seen only in promises.

When they reached her destination, she climbed out, certain tomorrow would look like yesterday. Adel stayed behind the wheel for a moment before driving away. He

didn't want to think too long about the price the people he loved might pay if he chose to leave.

Before much longer, Lubna would look for his car and fail to find it. She would have to learn on her own how the very same road could become longer when the person she was used to traveling it with was gone.

Chapter Two: The Woman Who Changed Everything

The idea grew quickly. Liberia was no longer a story told by a customer in the salon. It had become a door Adel could walk through before the tax authorities closed another one on him.

Before leaving, he sat down with his brother Mokhtar. The salons would stay open. The taxes had to be paid. Oum Kalthoum and the children would receive a fixed amount every month.

“Your children are my children,” Mokhtar said.

Mounir was still an infant when Adel placed his brother in charge of running the salons, settling the tax debts, and sending monthly money to the family. The terms seemed clear. But a promise that was clearly stated was not necessarily a promise that would be kept.

◆

At home, the children didn't understand travel the way adults did. They knew only that their father would be away. Lubna knew how special she was to him. She knew he kept his

promises. She knew that when he went out the door, she could wait for him to come back.

Before he left, she asked, “Who's going to take me to the movies?”

Adel smiled.

“When I come back, I'll take you.”

“Don't stay away too long,” she said quickly.

“I won't be gone long.”

He said his absence would be brief. Lubna remembered the promise until remembering it began to hurt.

◆

Adel traveled to Liberia knowing less about the country than a man leaving behind a wife and children ought to know. The first obstacle was waiting for him when he arrived, before he had even set foot on a city street.

Stepping off the plane, he found a modest airport that bore little resemblance to the picture he'd built in his mind of a country rich in diamonds. Still, his enthusiasm held. He had come in search of what lay beyond the airport, not what was inside it.

He followed the other passengers toward immigration, confident that the Moroccan woman who had told him about Liberia was waiting outside. But at the passport counter, an officer asked a question he wasn't prepared for.

“Where's your entry visa?”

Adel had no visa. He hadn't even known he needed one. He tried to explain, but the immigration officers refused to let him through.

One by one, the other passengers departed, and Adel remained where he was. At work, he was used to finding solutions: calming an angry customer, fixing a bad haircut, settling disagreements between employees. Here, he could do nothing but wait before an unfamiliar official in a country whose laws he didn't know.

For a few moments the diamonds and opportunities that had brought him there faded from his mind. He began imagining himself put on another plane back to Morocco before he'd even seen the first street of the country on which he'd pinned his hopes.

What would he say when he got back? How would he face his family after leaving them to make a fresh start? His problem wasn't especially complicated. A single question before departure could have spared him this embarrassment. Perhaps that made it worse: he'd traveled all this way only to be stopped by something it hadn't occurred to him to ask about.

Outside, the Moroccan woman waited among those greeting arriving passengers. She watched people emerge, one after another, searching in vain for his face. Eventually she met a Lebanese passenger who'd been on the same flight. He told her Adel was still at immigration because he had no visa.

She understood at once and went to work. Calling on her contacts, she spoke with immigration officers and tried to persuade them to allow him in.

Adel, meanwhile, had no idea what was happening outside or whether she even knew he was in trouble. Time crawled. Every passenger who left the hall made him feel more alone before a decision he could not change.

After several attempts, the woman succeeded. Adel was finally permitted to enter Liberia without a visa.

His determination to succeed hadn't changed, but his belief that enthusiasm alone would allow him to handle anything had taken a blow. He'd discovered that courage wasn't always enough. Some doors opened neither to experience nor persistence, but only with someone else's help.

He entered the arrivals hall, searching for the woman who was waiting for him. When he saw her, he felt a deep gratitude mixed with embarrassment. He had been in Liberia only a few hours. He hadn't yet begun the work that brought him there. Already he owed her more than he'd ever expected.

He could have taken the experience as an early warning: he was in a country whose laws, languages, and ways of doing business he did not understand. But he refused to let this beginning shake his decision.

He had arrived. He had overcome the first obstacle. As for what waited beyond the airport doors, all he knew were the stories he'd heard and the hopes he'd carried from Morocco.

Chapter Three: At the Threshold of Exile

The woman did not leave Adel to fend for himself in his first days in Liberia. She helped him find somewhere to live and introduced him to people she knew, including Lebanese merchants doing business there. Barbering was the only trade Adel knew well, so at first there was only one route he could take toward making a living: his scissors. His experience with different kinds of hair, especially African hair, helped him adapt. It was as if he were beginning all over again.

◆

Over time, Adel and the Moroccan woman who had helped him since his arrival grew closer. She knew he was married, with a wife and children in Morocco. It had never been a secret between them.

One day she said, without warning, “Adel, why don't we get married?”

He looked up at her and gave a small smile.

“Get married? Are you serious?”

“Why not? I know you. I know your situation. We're comfortable together.”

His expression shifted.

“But you know I have a wife and children back in Morocco.”

“I know. It's not something I just found out today.”

Adel fell silent, looking for words that wouldn't wound her.

“Listen, I came here to change my life, not make it more complicated.”

“So you don't want to marry me?”

“That's not the point. I left Morocco with enough problems already. I don't want to get myself into any new ones.”

She looked at him and understood that this wasn't a decision he'd made on the spot.

“What I need to do now,” he went on quietly, “is work, get back on my feet, and figure out where my life is going.”

They didn't marry. Adel kept working in the salon and asking questions about the country he didn't know and the stones he'd come to find.

One question came up more often than any other.

“Where are the diamonds?”

People sometimes laughed. Here was a man who had come to cut hair asking everyone within reach about rocks.

Then, one day, a man arrived carrying a small stone. A diamond. He offered it to Adel, who bought it for about a hundred dollars. Almost that same day, Adel managed to sell it for around a thousand.

A hundred dollars had become a thousand.

He never forgot the deal. Liberia was no longer a promise he'd heard from a customer. It was money he'd held in his own hands. Whenever he paid for another attempt, he could return in his mind to that first success.

◆

He began buying equipment. Paying workers. Paying the fees required for prospecting and digging. He traveled to places rumored to contain diamonds. Some contained nothing at all. He dug. He paid. He waited. Then he moved somewhere else.

Yet that first profit remained in his mind as undeniable proof: if it had happened once, it could happen again.

The salon became somewhere he returned between trips rather than the work that organized his days.

◆

Back in Morocco, Mokhtar kept his word at first. Money arrived at the house. The salons stayed open. Adel seemed able to put his worries aside.

Then Mokhtar began spending more of his time out drinking. The money coming in from the business was no longer going where Adel had directed it.

The old tax debts went unpaid, and the amounts overdue grew. Eventually, the money sent to the family began arriving late.

Mokhtar hadn't created the original debt. But he'd taken over salons whose obligations were known. He didn't make paying them a priority, and things kept getting worse.

The salons were struggling while Mokhtar carried on with his nights out. At home, the family felt the consequences long before the children understood the reasons.

Alcohol was his way of escaping his life, but it didn't always silence what was inside him. On some nights his guilt took the form of strange behavior that frightened the children and left Oum Kalthoum unsure what to do.

He would come to his brother's house late at night, stumbling, his speech thick with drink. He'd walk into a house full of sleeping people and shout for Oum Kalthoum.

“Oum Kalthoum! Get the kids up and feed them dinner!”

She would try to calm him, explaining that they had already eaten and gone to bed. But he kept calling.

“Get up! Come on, my brother's children! Have you had dinner? Get up and eat!”

The children woke in alarm. Their eyes struggled open as they stared at him from their beds, unable to understand why their uncle had come so late or why he was insisting they eat. They weren't hungry. They just wanted to go back to sleep.

He kept asking, as though feeding them at that hour might relieve some of the weight he carried. He didn't see that these children needed another dinner far less than they needed the sense of security draining out of their home.

The money that was supposed to sustain their stable life was being squandered. Yet in his drunken moments Mokhtar seemed desperate to reassure himself that they hadn't gone to sleep hungry.

One night he drank so much that he lost control of his body. He went into the bathroom and couldn't get out on his own.

Oum Kalthoum heard him and went to see what had happened. She found him in a pitiful state. She took hold of him and tried to get him on his feet. Lubna was there. She saw the uncle whose loud voice woke them at night, now unable to stand without her mother's help.

She was too young to understand everything happening among the adults, but old enough to remember images that never leave you. That one stayed with her: an uncle who came in the middle of the night to ask whether his brother's children had eaten, then drank himself into a state where he couldn't leave the bathroom alone.

She couldn't tell whether he woke them out of love, remorse, or a last attempt to quiet his conscience. What she could see was fear in her brothers' eyes, exhaustion on her mother's face, and a man falling apart before them as the family's circumstances fell apart around him.

◆

While scenes like these repeated themselves in the family home in Morocco, Adel was far away in Liberia, consumed by the search for diamonds. He dug into the ground hoping to find a stone that would change his future, while the life he had left behind was changing in ways he would never have wished on his family.

He hadn't lost contact with home completely. News reached him from Morocco in telephone calls, and he knew something

of what was happening to his businesses and family. But hearing news from a distance and seeing with your own eyes what is happening to your children are two different things. A phone call cannot close that distance.

No one relieved them of the burden of what had happened. The words Mokhtar shouted in the night could not repair what had been lost during the day.

Time wasn't waiting for Adel's return. While he searched for a fortune he had yet to find, his family was losing things, day after day, that money alone could never bring back.

Chapter Four: When the House Came Down

The house didn't fall in a single day. First the money dwindled. Then it stopped coming. Then something worse happened.

The unpaid taxes had begun accumulating before Adel left, but he'd fled the country out of fear of prison and left the debts behind. Mokhtar took charge of the salons. He was supposed to pay what was owed and keep the businesses afloat. Instead, he allowed the obligations to grow until the authorities came to the salons.

The old account had reached its end. Seizure. Closure. Bankruptcy.

Those three words meant one thing on official documents and quite another in the family's life. On paper, a business had ceased operating and legal proceedings had begun. At home, an old sense of certainty had ended: a mother had a place she knew how to manage, and children had possessions they assumed would always be where they'd left them. Suddenly, anything could be lost at any time.

◆

And it didn't stop with the salons. What Lubna carried away from that period wasn't a tax figure or an official notice. It was the sight of things being carried out of the house. Familiar furniture. Objects that had stood in the same places for years. Small details no one thinks of as precious until someone takes them away.

It was as though the house were being emptied of its memories, piece by piece.

You can forget what a chair or a cabinet means while you still own it. You remember when you look at the empty place where it stood. Lubna didn't understand legal seizure, nor was she expected to. She saw her mother confronting something too powerful to resist. She watched the world she knew recede around her.

In the end, almost all that remained to them were the clothes they were wearing.

◆

They moved into their grandmother's house. It was small—too small to contain them all, but somehow it did.

Their grandmother's house wasn't a solution to the crisis, only shelter from its consequences. Each person had to learn to need less room, speak more quietly, and wait a turn for things they'd never thought about before. The walls made no complaint, but their closeness governed every movement.

Too many bodies in too little space. Mounir was still an infant, and his need for milk knew nothing about bankruptcy.

◆

One day, Oum Kalthoum sent Lubna to the pharmacy for milk. She had no money to pay for it. The pharmacist knew the family. They had always settled their bills.

“Tell him to put it on our account,” her mother said. “We'll pay him later.”

The pharmacist gave her the can of milk on credit.

Lubna brought it home knowing that he hadn't turned her away and that her baby brother would have his milk that day. Yet it didn't feel entirely like a victory. On the way, she'd learned that need was measured not only in what a household lacked, but also in what people had to say to strangers. Oum Kalthoum had sent her daughter to face that moment because she could see no other way.

It wasn't charity. That was precisely what Lubna remembered: once, they had been able to pay immediately. Now they needed extra time to pay for a baby's milk.

The collapse didn't arrive in the form of a single announcement their mother could explain. It arrived in small delays: money that didn't come on time, a purchase put off until the following week, a request Oum Kalthoum could no longer answer as she once had. The children noticed the change before they had a name for it. If one of them asked for something they used to get, the answer was short: not now.

Lubna watched her mother more closely than she watched their possessions. She saw how she counted what remained, how she paused before buying anything, how the question of

price began to take longer than the question of need. Lubna could do nothing to change what was happening, but she was beginning to see the difference between a home that ran short of cash for a few days and one whose inhabitants had no idea when money might come at all. In the second kind of home, waiting became a daily occupation, and every surprise another burden.

When strangers came to remove furniture, it wasn't simply a matter of moving objects from one place to another. The things left traces behind: a patch of floor lighter than the rest, a wall that had lost what stood against it, a corner suddenly so bare you could see what lay beyond. A child didn't need to understand repossession to know that the house she loved was losing its features. Lubna knew the names of the objects and the memories attached to them. She had no power to keep them from going.

Their grandmother's house wasn't far from the people they loved, but it was far from their former life. The narrow rooms demanded new arrangements for sleeping and moving around. Private conversations could be heard by people they weren't meant for. There was no longer enough space for each person to be angry alone or cry out of sight. Mounir was too young to understand anything beyond the fact that hunger returned on schedule and milk had to be there when he needed it. Whatever had happened to their property, his mother and siblings had to meet that need every day.

That was why Lubna never forgot the walk to the pharmacy. It wasn't longer than other walks she knew. It

simply required a different sort of courage: entering a store where her family had always paid and asking to have the cost written down until later. The pharmacist wasn't cruel. He didn't humiliate her. Still, she walked out carrying the can as if it contained new knowledge about poverty. Poverty didn't just take things from you. It put words on your tongue you had never imagined needing to say.

In the crowded house, there was no obvious place for talking about the past. It did no good to remind the children each morning what they used to own. Yet the old life remained present in small things: someone searching for an object in its former place, someone mentioning the name of a salon that was no longer open, Oum Kalthoum passing a shop she used to enter without calculating the cost of every necessity. Their earlier life hadn't been perfect, but it had given them the feeling that tomorrow was predictable. Now tomorrow was a question.

Lubna wasn't the oldest sibling, but she began looking at the younger ones differently. When Mounir cried, she couldn't tell herself it had nothing to do with her. When she saw her mother exhausted, she no longer waited every time to be asked for help. Responsibility was seeping into her days before it had a clear name. Leaving school and going to work, as she would later do, would not be a separate upheaval. It would be the continuation of what she was learning while she watched her home lose its stability.

Oum Kalthoum didn't know when the crisis would end. Sometimes a few quiet hours were enough for her to regain

her ability to cope, only for a new need from one of the younger children to send her back to her calculations. She couldn't act as though she were alone, and no one could take every burden from her shoulders. Between the children's needs and their father's absence, Lubna's new life took shape—without an announcement, and without anyone asking whether she was ready.

◆

Contact with Adel hadn't been broken entirely. Letters arrived from time to time, in an era when communication was difficult. He was still finding his feet in Liberia, trying to settle in and establish an income. According to his account, he sent whatever money he could through a bank beside the salon where he worked. Oum Kalthoum later told him, more than once, that none of it had reached her. No clear explanation emerged until Adel returned to Morocco and said he discovered that the funds he'd sent had been held at a Moroccan bank. His family had received none of them.

News eventually reached him that the salons were gone, creditors had seized his possessions, and his family had been forced to move in with the grandmother.

◆

When he learned that the creditors had taken everything he owned and the family was living in his mother-in-law's house, Adel understood that the life he'd left behind had completely collapsed. But amid the loss, one fear that had pursued him

since his departure fell away. With the creditors having seized all his assets, he believed he was no longer in danger of imprisonment.

He decided to return to Morocco. He moved his family out of the grandmother's house and rented them a home larger than the one where they'd been staying.

The children went inside carrying their clothes and the few things that remained. Home looked like a home again. But Oum Kalthoum was not about to watch him pick up his suitcase and leave once more without a fight. She kept looking at his passport, an idea forming in her mind.

Chapter Five: Just Two Months

Oum Kalthoum didn't wait for a chance to hide Adel's passport. She took it right in front of him, making her intentions plain.

“You're not leaving.”

He looked at her. Inside the house, Adel wasn't the same man who negotiated with workers and merchants.

“All right,” he said.

Then he fell silent.

◆

He stayed in Morocco for almost two months. During those two months, the couple returned to something resembling married life—at least enough for Adel to start talking about Liberia again. Opportunity. Diamonds. Money that would come. A life transformed. Oum Kalthoum refused. He argued. Then he came back to the subject. Little by little, he brought her around to the very idea that had cost them their home once already: perhaps this time he would return with enough wealth to make up for everything they'd lost.

Eventually she gave him back his passport, and he left.

Adel's return had allowed him to see for himself how much had changed. He no longer heard about the salons over a telephone line; he could look at what had become of the businesses he had left behind. He walked familiar streets and discovered that his place in them had changed. Before he'd gone away, he had been an owner opening his doors each morning. Now he was a man trying to repair, in a few short weeks, everything that had accumulated during his absence. Repairing the damage did not restore trust so easily.

He rented a larger house for his family, and the children's happiness when they moved in was real. It would be unfair to erase that joy simply because the days that followed were harder. Once again, each child had a place to put their clothes. Their mother could move through the rooms without apologizing for the lack of space. Yet the new house gave no answer to the larger question: would Adel stay?

Oum Kalthoum didn't want to test another promise by waiting. She took his passport in front of him as if she were holding the one thing capable of keeping distance from opening again between him and his children. The passport hadn't caused his absence, but to her it had become the tangible instrument of it. Perhaps if she kept it out of reach, she could postpone his departure. Adel, so confident when he spoke of his projects outside the home, did not turn the confrontation into shouting. He said nothing. And he stayed.

The next two months weren't filled entirely with arguments. There were ordinary days when they ate together and the family woke to find their father in the house. Those

days made his next departure more painful. An absence after a brief return doesn't leave you at the starting point of waiting. It gives you a moment in which you believe everything might come right, then takes that moment away.

Adel spoke of Liberia again and again, not simply as a man describing a distant place but as someone clinging to his last possible way out. Returning there meant a chance to recover what he had lost—and perhaps to prove that his first departure hadn't been a complete mistake. Oum Kalthoum saw what had already happened: a home lost to creditors, children forced to live with their grandmother, promises that couldn't feed a baby. They weren't arguing about the name of a country. They were arguing about what was worth risking.

When Adel left again, the door closed on more than one man. It closed on the possibility that those two months might have been a new beginning. Oum Kalthoum was carrying a child not yet born. She couldn't know that the loss to come would make that short time still more bitter in her memory.

Lubna sometimes accompanied her mother on errands—not because she could lift every burden from her shoulders, but because walking beside her had become a small way to help. When Oum Kalthoum said she felt suffocated and needed to get out for a while, her daughter didn't need a long explanation. She put down whatever she was doing and went with her. Among the storefronts of the market arcade and the passing faces, her mother could breathe away from rooms that reminded her of everything that had changed, even though the problems would be waiting when she returned.

Lubna didn't know how to comfort a woman carrying so much responsibility, nor should she have been expected to. Sometimes they walked and talked; sometimes they walked in silence. Then they went home. On those outings, the relationship between mother and daughter changed quietly. The mother was no longer the only one trying to protect the child from the world. Now the child was doing what she could to make that world weigh less heavily on her mother. With each passing day, the age Lubna actually was drifted a little farther from the age she was being made to live.

The pregnancy that had begun during those two brief months wasn't a guarantee of new happiness. Oum Kalthoum carried it in her body while trying to carry the whole household through each day. When the time came to give birth, the family wasn't prepared for another loss. No one could have predicted what happened, or found words afterward capable of returning what was gone. Life, however cruel, kept demanding food, rent, and care for the younger children. Grief itself had to find a place among necessities.

◆

The pregnancy had begun in those two months Adel spent in Morocco, while his passport was in Oum Kalthoum's hands and she was trying to keep him among his children. It might not yet have been visible, but it began in the days when the house seemed, however briefly, to have its father back.

When she returned the passport and he left again, the pregnancy remained with her. The child was responsible for

none of what had happened, but it was coming at a time when its mother needed someone to share her fear, not another absence.

Fear and pressure became too much to contain indoors. Sometimes she told Lubna, “Take me out for a little while. I can't breathe in here.”

They walked through the market together. A mother and daughter surrounded by people, while the father was on another continent.

◆

The day of the birth came. A midwife was present. But the baby was stillborn.

The midwife couldn't bring Oum Kalthoum the cry every mother waits to hear. The loss was there before life could begin, in a household whose members had learned to carry on no matter how much they lost. The word *sadness* was too small for a woman who had spent months of pregnancy alone and then faced the silence of the newborn she'd been waiting for.

The house didn't fill with wailing or long conversations. A quiet grief settled over it, as if each person had chosen to keep the hurt inside. The grief was buried deep, and life resumed its course—though it was no longer the same life.

◆

With Adel gone, the pressure returned to the house he'd rented after moving the family out of the grandmother's

home. It was roomier, but it was nothing like the home they had known before their circumstances changed. Although the move had brought some relief, old burdens soon weighed down their days again. They didn't stay there long. The rent became more than they could afford, and they moved once more, this time to a smaller house in a working-class neighborhood.

The second move wasn't a sudden collapse like the move to the grandmother's. It was a slow wearing away of the hope that remained. Each day Oum Kalthoum had to balance rent, food, and the children's needs, deciding which necessity could be put off. In a home where choices have narrowed to almost nothing, education is sometimes the first thing a child is asked to give up.

The rooms grew smaller. The children grew older. The family accounts no longer allowed everyone to remain a child.

◆

One morning, Lubna dressed for school. She was getting ready to leave when Oum Kalthoum looked at her and said the words that would stay with her for the rest of her life.

“Take off your school clothes.”

Lubna stopped.

“You need to work,” her mother said.

Two months hadn't been enough to give Lubna her father back or Oum Kalthoum her peace of mind. When he left once

more, the family went back to waiting for his return, with no date to circle on a calendar.

Chapter Six: Take Off Your School Clothes

The morning Oum Kalthoum told her daughter to take off her school clothes, she said very little. There was no long family meeting to explain the decision.

Lubna didn't ask a question that could have changed anything. She knew her brothers needed to stay in school and her mother couldn't cover everyone's expenses alone. But knowing why you have lost something doesn't make the loss easier.

Until that moment, her school uniform had been an ordinary part of the morning, something she never thought about. Suddenly it became a sign of a life other girls would continue without her. Taking it off didn't mean she stopped wanting to be one of them.

For the first time, Lubna discovered that work was nothing like school. In class, she could ask questions when she didn't understand. Here, she was expected to complete whatever was assigned, without tiring. Day by day she learned to do it, pushing past her confusion and shyness.

Oum Kalthoum hadn't been comfortable asking this of her daughter. Need had narrowed her options until she could find no other choice.

Lubna didn't keep a notebook recording everything she'd lost. She began instead to collect other things in her memory: wages, the names of workplaces, the hours she was supposed to arrive, faces she couldn't afford to forget.

These were lessons of another kind. They couldn't replace school, but they would follow her through every door she opened afterward.

She barely had time to mourn the loss of school. She had to work. But school didn't vanish from her path just because she had taken off the uniform. On her way to work in the mornings, she passed close to the routes her classmates took. She could see them in the distance, carrying their schoolbags and wearing their uniforms, and for an instant she felt the return of the mornings she'd lost.

The girl forced to grow up before her time would wait until her classmates were gone before continuing. If she spotted one of them coming toward her, she'd duck into the entrance of a building or hide behind a corner until the girl passed. It wasn't the work itself that embarrassed her. It was the questions she didn't know how to answer: Why aren't you in school anymore? Where are your books? Why are you wearing those clothes during school hours? She was afraid they'd see her outside the classroom and discover that her life

had changed before she'd found the words to explain it herself.

Her first job was at a business selling plants and gardening supplies. Among her duties were answering the telephone and making calls. Her family didn't have a phone at home, so the receiver was unfamiliar, something she didn't yet know how to use with confidence.

One day her supervisor asked her to call a number. She picked up the receiver and dialed it as he'd dictated. A woman's voice came through, speaking French quickly and in a firm, even tone. Lubna couldn't make out the words. Convinced the woman was angry with her, she hung up in confusion.

“What did she say?” the supervisor asked.

“A woman answered,” Lubna said honestly, “and she started yelling at me.”

He dialed the same number, listened for a moment, and smiled. The people around her realized what had happened and laughed. There had been no angry woman on the other end of the line. It was a recorded message in French explaining that the number she'd dialed was incorrect.

Lubna blushed, then laughed with them when she understood. She remembered the incident not because she'd made a mistake, but because she was learning things at work she'd never had a chance to learn before.

Each morning her classmates continued on to school while she went to work, carrying responsibilities she had never imagined facing at her age.

◆

After that, she spent some time working in a shoe store. One job followed another. None was what she truly wanted. In fact, she didn't yet know what she wanted. She knew only that the family needed an income.

◆

The old question stayed with her. She didn't count the years Adel had been away by dates, but by the things that happened without him there to see them: the family's moves, the schooldays that had come to an end, the times she had needed to ask another man what he knew of her father.

When she heard that someone had returned from Liberia and knew Adel, a job and a jewelry store were the last things on her mind. She wanted to meet the man and question him. She had memorized a few French words, enough to begin a conversation. She hadn't learned how to protect herself against what she might hear.

That meeting, whose first words remained fixed in her memory, taught her something she'd never imagined: news about your father could hurt more than his absence. The hardest part wasn't simply that the man told her to forget him. It was having to go home afterward, to eat and sleep and wake up as if nothing had changed.

When Lubna first learned that a man had come back from Liberia who knew her father, she hadn't recovered from the very idea of his absence. She'd learned to work, return home, and sometimes hide her exhaustion, but something remained of the child who once waited at the school gates. That was why she went to see the man the way people approach long-awaited news: hurrying toward it while fearing what they might hear.

What he said about the letters gave her no comfort. If he'd told her that her father was sick or poor, she might have found something she could understand. But letters that arrived and remained unopened offered no single explanation. Was Adel afraid of the news they might contain? Did he think there was nothing in them worth reading? Or did he simply prefer not to know? She had no evidence for any answer, yet the image was more painful than many possible explanations.

That evening, when she told her mother about the job opportunity, the other part of her visit stayed locked inside her chest. Her silence wasn't a comforting lie; it was an inability to carry the news to another person. In those years, Lubna had learned that some truths don't grow lighter when spoken aloud. But they don't disappear simply because you don't say them, either.

When she stood outside the jewelry store the following day, she didn't enter the trade that would shape her future with any knowledge of where it would lead. She wanted a job that would help her family. Nothing more. The day before, the

man had seen a girl asking after her father. Now he saw someone trying to stand tall in clothes she had chosen to make herself look older. Between those visits, something had changed that didn't show easily on her face. She would have to see the store not as a source of news but as the beginning of a long day of responsibility.

In the window, pieces of jewelry glittered under the lights. She couldn't imagine that one day she'd own a display window like it. If anyone had told her so, she would have thought they were only trying to comfort her. The dream hadn't yet been born. Need alone guided her steps.

When the man invited her to return to the jewelry store the next day, she didn't see the offer as rescue or reward. Work was necessary, and necessity doesn't wait for grief to subside. So as she left, the question in her mind wasn't *Why did this man choose me?* It was *Can I come back tomorrow and work, after everything I've heard?*

Chapter Seven: Leave Your Sorrow at the Door

The next morning, Lubna didn't want to look fourteen. She dressed in mauve, borrowed makeup from a friend, and put on high heels that slowed her steps but, she believed, added a few years to her age. She went to the jewelry store without knowing what sort of work awaited her.

The owner looked at her. He knew her story and knew what he'd told her about Adel. But he didn't greet her with pity.

“Leave your sorrow at the door,” he said.

Then, gesturing around the store, he added, “And whatever you see or hear in here stays in here.”

She nodded. She didn't yet understand how much the gold business depended on a watchful eye and a tongue that knew when to be still.

◆

Lubna didn't start behind the desk or at the display cases where customers stood. She started on the floor, polishing glass every morning and doing small jobs nobody noticed unless they went undone. She walked to the nearby café to

bring the owner his morning coffee, then went back to cleaning and straightening up.

He sent her on errand after errand: buying supplies for the store, delivering something elsewhere, collecting messages from acquaintances. She walked the distances and returned to find another task waiting. It wasn't only the errands that exhausted her. It was the feeling that the workday started over each time she thought it was almost finished.

The owner watched her arrive with coffee or return from an errand and noticed how she carried out instructions. He didn't talk with her at length, but he saw that she remembered what he told her the first time and didn't need every detail repeated. While polishing the glass, she watched what took place behind it: customers' faces, the way they asked about particular pieces, the shift in the salespeople's voices when the conversation turned to price.

◆

One morning, the owner stepped out on a nearby errand, leaving Lubna to polish one of the display cases. A woman came in asking about a piece she'd seen on a previous visit. Lubna wasn't authorized to open the cabinets or show the jewelry, but she remembered the woman—and the ring she'd studied so closely.

“The owner isn't here right now, but he'll be back soon.”

The customer pointed toward the display and asked about the ring.

“If you mean the one you were looking at last time,” Lubna said after a brief hesitation, “it isn't in this case.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I remember you looking at it.”

Lubna opened nothing and touched not a single piece. She asked the woman to wait for the owner, and when he returned, she was still there. After the customer left, he asked Lubna how she'd known which ring she meant. She told him simply that she'd seen it before and remembered the woman.

He didn't praise her or promise her anything. He only asked how she'd remembered the customer, then went back to work. Lubna resumed her tasks, unsure whether he'd seen anything noteworthy in what she'd done.

◆

Some time later, he sent her to buy supplies. She returned with the purchases and the change, explaining that the seller had given her too much money and she'd noticed the error and gone back to correct it before returning to the store.

“Why'd you go back?”

The question surprised her more than the mistake.

“Because it wasn't my money.”

He said nothing. He knew anyone working in gold needed more than the ability to persuade a customer. The work required memory, judgment, and honesty that did not change when no one was watching. He was beginning to see those qualities in the girl he sent to clean windows and fetch coffee.

Still, he didn't move her to the desk. He kept observing her, testing her capacity for responsibility, while she continued with the same jobs, unaware of what he saw in her.

◆

Almost two years passed this way. Lubna didn't complain about every task; she'd learned early that her household needed her income. But she returned home exhausted from standing, walking, and cleaning. Eventually her fatigue seemed to arrive home ahead of her. One day she told Oum Kalthoum she didn't want to work at the jewelry store anymore.

She didn't ask for a promotion or talk about a future in the gold trade. She said only that she was tired and couldn't spend her entire life cleaning and running errands. Seeing how worn out her daughter had become, Oum Kalthoum went to the owner and told him Lubna wanted to quit.

He listened without arguing much.

“Have her come tomorrow,” he said.

He neither accepted nor rejected the resignation. He asked that Lubna come herself the following day. Her mother brought back that answer, and Lubna wondered what was waiting for her.

“This desk is yours.”

She looked at the desk, then at him, uncertain she'd heard correctly. He explained that over the past two years he'd noticed her ability to understand, remember, and keep his

trust. The gold business, he said, required more than salesmanship. It required precision, good judgment, and an understanding of what must remain inside the store.

“Starting today, you're going to learn the trade.”

Lubna sat at the desk for the first time. She'd arrived hoping to leave the place; instead, she was entering it through another door. She didn't know that the two years she'd thought wasted had, through patience and careful observation, given her the first things she needed for a life in jewelry.

Sitting at the desk didn't mean she now knew the secrets of the business. There was much to learn: weights and calculations, names for different pieces, and how to deal with customers. But she knew the place well, and she understood that trust there was not easily given.

From behind the glass, she watched how customers differed. Some knew exactly what they wanted and named a price before even looking at a piece. Others compared items at length. Still others weren't asking so much about gold as about the right gift for someone waiting at home. Lubna wasn't yet a salesperson, but she began to understand that business was never only about numbers. Some people bought to celebrate, some to apologize, and some hesitated because the amount was more than they could afford. The faces and words stayed with her as clearly as the names of the jewelry.

As the days passed, she began to understand the nature of the place where she'd spent two years never dreaming she

might one day sit behind the desk. She didn't ask about everything. She watched, listened, and tried to understand before speaking. In this business attention was essential, and misplaced curiosity could cost a person trust that no amount of money could buy.

Her life didn't change overnight, but something fundamental had shifted. She was no longer the girl who entered the store to clean and left worn out. She was learning a trade that might open a path she'd never imagined.

At the store, Lubna learned that knowing jewelry meant more than memorizing names, weights, and prices. She had to know how to handle people and understand what was being asked of her before acting. No one expected her to master everything from the beginning. Sometimes she made mistakes, then learned how to correct them.

There was another difference she didn't recognize at first. At school, knowledge had come in books, one page after another. Here it was scattered among people's voices and the movements of their hands. When a customer changed his mind at the last moment, she learned that trust could not be forced. When she heard the owner refuse an unsuitable deal, she understood that selling didn't mean accepting any price. Watching an unsold piece returned to its place, she learned not to let disappointment show on her face.

These lessons couldn't replace her education, but they became experience she could depend on.

She learned a new kind of waiting, too. She waited for customers to make their choices, for the owner to return, for a cabinet to be opened so a particular piece could be taken out. She could use those minutes to straighten the display or review the names she'd memorized.

Waiting for her father was different. It was a wait without an ending she could foresee, and there was nothing she could do to shorten it. Perhaps that was why she grew attached to the work despite her exhaustion. Here, at least, she could accomplish something with her own hands instead of living suspended from something that might happen someday.

There was another side of the store's life that no one taught her in words: when to ask, and when to stay quiet. If customers spoke about private matters, she didn't interrupt. If two people disagreed over a price, she didn't show surprise. If the owner was away, she didn't handle the gold as though his trust gave her permission to do whatever she wished.

These rules weren't written down. She learned them from a glance or an incident. In time, she realized that the small tasks she'd performed over the past two years had trained her to notice what was happening around her without losing her composure.

When she went home, she knew her day didn't end at the store's door. There was a mother who asked about her day, siblings who needed things, money that had to stretch. She had little room in her life to celebrate each advance at work, but she could feel herself changing.

She was no longer the girl who'd panicked at a recorded French message on the telephone, thinking an angry woman was yelling at her. She was better able to face unfamiliar situations and less afraid of making mistakes. Now she knew that what she didn't understand today could be learned tomorrow.

She still wasn't thinking of owning a store of her own. But her experience was growing, her confidence quietly taking root. Each day among the jewelry and customers brought her, without her knowing it, closer to the road she would eventually choose for herself.

Chapter Eight: Where's the Girl Who Came with You?

The owner wasn't the kind of merchant who waited for customers to come to him. He knew some customers never visited the market at all. You had to go to them.

◆

He went into Morocco's royal palaces and the homes and residences of Gulf princes staying in the country. Sometimes he had an appointment. Sometimes he didn't have a definite one, relying instead on his connections, boldness, and ability to talk his way through a door. He began taking Lubna along.

◆

She wasn't brought along to stand in the background. He dressed her in pieces from his collection: a necklace, bracelets, diamonds. Then she entered the room in front of the customers. Jewelry on a person wasn't the same as jewelry inside a box. He knew that, and Lubna quickly learned how to stand, when to speak, and when to let the piece itself do the rest.

◆

The visits went well. Many pieces came out of their cases and never went back in. The owner understood that Lubna's presence had become part of the presentation, not merely an accompaniment.

Her value wasn't in the jewels she wore; those returned to their boxes after each visit. Her value lay in the way she'd learned to give a piece a presence and meet the person before her with confidence. The girl who had started by cleaning floors was standing in places she'd never imagined entering, discovering that skill could open doors money alone could not.

He learned just how much she mattered the day he went without her. He visited one of the princes with nearly the same collection. The prince looked at the jewelry, then at him.

“Where's the girl who came with you?”

The merchant explained that she hadn't come this time.

“Then you can go,” the prince said curtly.

The man left without making a sale.

◆

When he returned to the store, Lubna didn't need to ask how the visit had gone. She could read it on his face. He told her what happened, and for the first time she understood clearly that her presence was no longer a minor detail.

◆

Success didn't come to Lubna in a single shining moment. Some days she left the store having sold well. Other days the hours dragged and nothing came of her hopes. She learned not to confuse a successful day with a successful career, or a ledger that showed a profit at day's end with a business free of obligations. Money passed through her hands, but she'd known since childhood how quickly it could vanish if no one took care of it.

As her experience grew, she began seeing the display cases differently. They no longer held only gold behind glass. They held decisions: which piece to show first, which customer needed an explanation, when a salesperson should fall silent and give the buyer room to choose. No one taught her all this in a single lesson. It came through repeated days, through small mistakes she couldn't always avoid, and through observations from the owner, who understood that the girl who'd started out cleaning had learned to read what was happening before her.

At home, Lubna remained a daughter and sister before she was a skilled employee. Her responsibilities didn't end when the shops closed. There was a mother waiting for help with expenses, brothers with needs of their own, and Mounir, whose bond with Lubna went far beyond what was usually expected of siblings. These burdens left her little time to imagine the future. Even so, a small idea took root: if she could learn all this in a store owned by someone else, why couldn't she one day have a store of her own?

She didn't make a decision right away. At first, the dream was closer to a question she was afraid to ask aloud. Owning a store meant more than sitting behind a desk. It meant paying rent, buying inventory, honoring debts, and enduring slow days as well as profitable ones.

Lubna knew the cost of being unable to pay what you owed better than many girls her age. Perhaps that was why her dream wasn't simply a wish to become rich. It was a wish not to spend her entire life dependent on someone else's decisions.

In the palaces, she learned things she could never have learned polishing the glass: how to present a piece before naming its price, how to read the person sitting across from her, how a person's presence could add value to what they offered.

And every now and then, a question came to her.

If I can sell all this for someone else, what if one day I could sell it for myself?

While that thought ripened in Morocco, Salah was preparing to travel to Liberia, where his father Adel lived. Their journeys were taking them in different directions: Lubna looked toward a future she could make with her own hands, while Salah prepared to meet the father who had been absent from his family for so long.

Chapter Nine: A Son in His Father's Country

Salah was Adel's oldest child, the first to grow old enough to remember life before it changed. He remembered the salons. The little outfits his father dressed him in, the *papillon* bow tie Adel loved to see him wear. Then he remembered what followed: the absence, the bankruptcy, and their grandmother's house.

◆

Salah contacted Adel to ask about work. In 1977, he traveled to Liberia with an incomplete picture of the life his father had built there. He wasn't going simply to confront him. He wanted a job and a future. He also wanted to see with his own eyes what could possibly have been worth all those years away. Lubna helped him with what he needed for the trip. While she was finding her footing in the gold trade, her older brother was heading toward the country that had taken their father from the family.

◆

Salah's first shock in Liberia was the shop. He didn't find a thriving diamond business or a fortune to make up for the years the family had lost. He found his father working in a small barbershop, in circumstances far removed from the picture the long absence had allowed him to imagine. He stood looking around at the shop and at the man he remembered as the owner of successful salons in Morocco. He couldn't hide his disappointment.

He didn't like the life there, and he said so. But leaving wasn't simple. He had come because he needed an opportunity, and Adel himself needed help. Salah stayed and worked beside his father, not because their differences had been resolved but because necessity made them share their days in spite of all that stood between them.

Living with Adel, Salah saw things the family back in Morocco could not see: a man who missed his children, asked about them, sometimes even cried when he thought of them, then returned the following day to the same work and the same life. Some visitors from Morocco reassured Adel that his family was doing well, occasionally exaggerating how well the children were managing. Adel believed what they said—or wanted to believe it.

◆

Salah traveled back to Morocco from time to time. On some of those visits, Adel entrusted him with money to deliver to Oum Kalthoum and the family. Another unresolved story remained between father and son. Adel later said that, on one occasion,

Salah hadn't delivered the money, but had instead bought himself an expensive pair of Texas-style cowboy boots. That was Adel's version of the incident. Lubna never had enough information to say with certainty exactly what happened.

Their relationship wasn't entirely clear or peaceful after that. Salah had seen the scale of disappointment his father's departure had brought to the family. He'd then had to stay and work beside him, while Adel carried his own account of the disagreements between them. Neither possessed the full story as the other saw it.

Salah had brought memories to Liberia he couldn't simply put aside. He'd been thirteen when Adel left for Liberia in 1967. He knew the difference between a household supported by prosperous salons and one forced to buy a baby's milk on credit. Still, his journey wasn't a trial of his father. He was a young man who wanted to work, and perhaps he wanted to find out for himself whether there was anything in this country worth those long years.

Outside the little barbershop, he found no ready explanation. The man he'd known as a well-dressed businessman in Morocco still knew his trade, but the shop looked nothing like the picture preserved in the son's memory. Salah couldn't ask about profits without remembering losses. He couldn't watch his father work so hard without feeling some pity. Here were two men in exile, joined by a family name but separated by years they hadn't lived together. Working side by side could not erase them.

When they argued, not every argument meant there was no love between them. A son could be angry because he'd expected more; a father could be angry because he heard in his son's questions accusations he didn't want to face. Then another morning would come, and they'd have to open the shop, welcome customers, and do work that couldn't wait for their feelings to settle. Everyday life forced them to cooperate before they could agree.

In Morocco, Lubna waited for news. She could no longer picture Adel as a wealthy man simply because he'd gone to the land of diamonds. There was another image now, more tired and less bright. Yet she couldn't stop hoping that he was all right. A daughter who had learned that the family's letters were left unopened didn't suddenly stop wanting to know how her father was. She wanted the truth, even if it was unlike anything she'd hoped to hear.

The story Adel told about the money sent with Salah wasn't easy to settle. It remained the father's account, not a verdict on the son. In families split between two countries, a single story can survive for years in differing versions. Lubna preferred to leave what she couldn't know for certain unresolved, rather than let it swallow what she did know: the family had paid a price for Adel's absence, and Salah had tried to make a different life for himself.

Over time, Salah came to understand that a person could miss his family and still be unable to make the decision to return to them; he could blame his father for being absent, then find himself depending on that same father in a strange

country. It wasn't an excuse for anyone, only another face of the complications left by years apart.

For Lubna, Salah's presence beside Adel was both reassuring and troubling. Her brother was close to their father now. He knew how he lived and what work he did. But he'd also brought back news that didn't fit the picture of wealth the family had imagined. Their father was no longer merely a distant name in Liberia. He was a man with a small shop, a difficult life, and conflicts that kinship alone could not erase.

Not because the truth didn't matter to him, but because feeling reassured was easier than facing the cost of absence.

◆

That knowledge was too heavy to fit into a single sentence carried home to Morocco. A person could long for those he'd left behind and still go on living the life that kept him away from them. Watching from close by, Salah began to understand that love alone couldn't repair what decisions had damaged.

◆

Back in Morocco, Lubna was walking along a street near her work when she stopped in front of a small shop offered for sale. She didn't go inside. She didn't have the money to buy it. But she found herself imagining what it might be like if it were hers. She had no idea that pausing before that door

would lead her to four days in which she'd discover whether she could turn a dream into a decision.

Chapter Ten: Four Days

The shop Lubna had noticed on the street was small, but it stayed on her mind long after she'd walked past. She hadn't gone out that day planning to buy a business, and she had none of the capital that would have made such an idea sensible. Yet she went back to the number she'd taken from the owner and called. First she wanted to know the price, as if having a figure would make the dream less vague.

They discussed the price and agreed to meet in four days to complete the sale. She hung up. Then reality caught up with her.

Where on earth am I going to get that kind of money?

◆

She could have called back and apologized. But in her mind the shop was already hers, even though the paperwork said otherwise. She began going through the names of people she knew. She decided not to tell anyone what the money was for. She didn't want advice, or someone telling her that the idea was too big for her.

All she wanted was a loan. She would pay it back.

She went from person to person.

“I need some money.”

“What for?”

“There's something I have to take care of.”

A small amount here, a larger amount there. At the end of the first day she didn't have enough. On the second she got closer. On the third, the missing portion still frightened her. Then came the fourth day. She counted the cash. Counted it again. The amount was complete.

She couldn't tell whether she wanted to celebrate or panic. This wasn't money she'd found in a chest. It represented the faith of people she would remain indebted to until every cent was returned. If she failed, the loss wouldn't be hers alone. Yet backing away after so many people had taken a step with her now seemed harder than going through with it.

◆

On the first day after hearing the price, Lubna tried to break the total into parts she could bear to think about. As a single huge number, it closed the door before she even began. Spread among people she knew, it might become something she could gather. She didn't know whether everyone would agree or how she'd face anyone who said no. All she knew was that the sale date wouldn't wait for her to feel brave.

She asked for loans without explaining the project. It wasn't a sign of disrespect for the people helping her. She was afraid the idea would be smothered by advice and objections before it took shape. She listened to the questions, answered only what she needed to, then moved on to the next name. Each

amount she received reduced one part of the burden and increased another: there were now people trusting her to repay them, and retreat was no longer her decision alone.

In the evenings, she returned to her figures. She separated what she'd collected from what remained, then added everything again for fear she'd made a mistake. Despair could have entered through the smallest gap between two numbers, but those four days gave her little time for regret. She woke knowing exactly what she still lacked. By the third day, being close to the total brought no relief. Even a small shortfall could ruin the entire deal.

Then the money came together. She didn't suddenly feel rich. Quite the opposite: she saw clearly how much she owed others. But there was an enormous difference between who she'd been four days earlier and who she was now. She was no longer talking about a shop she might own. She had an appointment she could attend with the full price in hand. The decision wasn't without risk. She accepted that risk knowing hard work—not luck alone—would make it possible to repay her debts.

When she opened the door of her shop after buying it, she faced a challenge she hadn't considered carefully enough: walls don't sell themselves. She needed gold to display, customers who trusted her, and patience through the first difficult days. At this point the owner of her old workplace returned to her life, not as a savior who controlled her future, but as a man who knew what she could do and let her begin with merchandise. His trust grew out of the years when she'd

learned that honesty didn't show itself in grand speeches but in the small details other people noticed even when you didn't know they were watching.

The hardest days came after the purchase, because she could no longer put responsibility for her decisions on anyone else. When she opened the store and no customer walked in, there was no more experienced boss to reassure her tomorrow would be better. When she sold a piece, she couldn't spend the money as if it were pure profit. She had to separate the cost of the inventory from what she'd need to buy more, and remember the names of everyone who'd loaned her money. She wrote figures down and checked them, worried about mixing the household accounts with those of the store. Adel's old crisis had taught her that a successful appearance could conceal debts no one saw.

A full display window didn't make her life easy. There were hours when she stood behind the glass worrying about an upcoming payment. Then a customer would walk in, and she had to greet a new face with a smile that didn't expose her anxiety. She learned to speak confidently about a piece without exaggerating, to give buyers time, and to admit what she didn't know rather than pretend and damage her reputation. The daily work tested her in ways invisible from outside the shop.

In the evenings, when she locked the door, she went home a daughter and sister just as before. Owning a shop didn't lessen her family's need for her, but it changed her part in making decisions. She was no longer waiting for someone else

to decide her wage at the end of the month. Now she was responsible for creating the income itself. This made her more careful and prouder of what she'd achieved. Every debt she paid off was more than a number crossed out in a ledger. It was another step toward making the key she carried the key to a place that was truly hers, not merely a place other people had trusted her to buy.

She kept the appointment and bought the store. When she stepped inside afterward, she stood looking at the walls. The first time she'd come, she had been a woman looking at a business for sale. Now she owned it. Her next thought came quickly: the shop was empty. She'd bought the walls and had almost nothing left with which to fill a jewelry display.

◆

The man who had first employed her came back into the story. The jewelry-store owner had known her since she was fourteen, from cleaning floors to sitting at his desk. He learned she'd bought a store and didn't stand in her way. He helped her with gold and merchandise to get started.

Lubna arranged the pieces behind the glass. For an instant she remembered the girl who used to wipe down someone else's display window. This time, she stood on the other side of the glass. She opened the door and went to work. Every sale had more than one purpose: new inventory, expenses, and a debt to repay.

She began paying people back, one by one. Four days after an agreement that had seemed impossible, the key was in her

hand. For the first time, she didn't need anyone to tell her, “This desk is yours.”

She didn't need to say a word. The key was in her hand, the shop was in front of her, and she would build whatever came next through work.

Four days hadn't solved everything. But they were enough to show Lubna a doorway she could walk through on her own.

Chapter Eleven: You Have to Ask My Father

The shop developed a rhythm of its own. Lubna opened the door each morning, arranged the gold, checked the accounts, and locked up in the evening, knowing that something begun with loans gathered over four days was proving it could stand on its own.

In the middle of this life, a man appeared. He was a Moroccan commercial pilot. He was serious about her, and as time passed it became clear he wanted to marry her.

◆

Lubna wasn't a girl waiting to get married before her life could begin. Her life had already begun. She had her work, her shop, and her responsibilities. When the conversation turned to an engagement, she laid down one condition.

“You have to ask my father.”

He looked at her.

“Your father's in Liberia.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“We'll go to him.”

She said it as though suggesting an ordinary trip. But the words came from a place deeper than the practical concerns of marriage. She had spent years asking strangers for news of her father. Now, with a clear reason to travel, she wanted to see him herself—not so he could grant her permission to live her life, but so he could be present, if only once, for a decision that concerned her.

◆

The condition wasn't entirely about marriage. Inside it was the little girl who had waited years for her father, who'd gone to a man returning from Liberia hoping for news, whose brother now lived there beside Adel. At last she had a way of reaching him herself. As the departure drew near, questions began to stir inside her.

Would she reproach him? Would she ask about the letters? Or would every question disappear when she stood before him?

◆

Lubna's condition for the pilot wasn't merely a family formality. She could have proceeded with the engagement and left her father to letters and phone calls. But she didn't want to begin a new life without seeing the man who'd missed so many of her beginnings. She wasn't seeking approval that would determine her fate; she'd already made harder

decisions on her own. She wanted her father to be present for a moment the past years could never return to her.

As the trip approached, the name Liberia began to mean something different. In childhood, it had been a place that swallowed news. Then it had become a place from which Salah brought stories of Adel's life. Now she herself was going there. She tried to picture her father's face when he saw her and couldn't decide how old to make him in her imagination: the man who'd left her near school, or the man whose hair now bore the marks of passing years? Old photographs don't grow older with the people in them. The meeting would force her to acknowledge the distance between those images.

She didn't want her accusations to reach him before her greeting did. But she couldn't convince herself that an embrace, if there was one, would explain everything. She carried memories of the grandmother's house, Mounir's milk, and the school clothes she'd been told to take off one unforgettable morning. Now she carried the keys to a shop of her own. She'd crossed the distance between those two images without her father's help. Yet within her remained a place no one else could occupy.

The man traveling with her was going to meet the father of the woman he hoped to marry. He couldn't know how much history she was carrying on that flight, history that had begun long before he entered her life. And that was enough to push thoughts of their future aside as the journey drew closer to its end. Before she could know whether the marriage would take place, she needed to see Adel and confront the question that

had remained suspended all these years: what happens to love when the person you love becomes a stranger to the details of your life?

She made arrangements for the shop before leaving. She wasn't someone who abandoned what she'd built and thought about the consequences afterward. Oum Kalthoum knew her daughter was going to see the man whose passport she had once taken to keep him from leaving. But Lubna was no longer a child anyone could prevent from reaching her father.

The day came. She left her shop behind and picked up her suitcase. She didn't know if the pilot would become her husband. She knew one thing: this time she wouldn't be asking anyone, “Have you seen my father?”

This time she would see him herself.

Chapter Twelve: Between Love and Reproach

Throughout the journey, Lubna knew where she was going but not what would happen when she arrived. In childhood, Liberia had been a name bound up with absence. Now it was a real place beneath her feet. The man who wanted to marry her was traveling with her, but as her meeting with Adel drew closer, marriage occupied less and less space in her mind.

◆

When she saw him, the years seemed to stop for a moment. This was Adel. He was no longer the picture she'd preserved, and she was no longer the child he'd left behind. She stood before him with years' worth of questions she'd prepared and no idea which one should come first. How did you begin?

With reproach? An embrace? Or one word?

“Dad.”

A single word, but it wasn't like the words families exchanged every day. It carried a little girl sitting beside her father in the car, a teenager who'd left school for work, and a woman who'd finally reached the man whose name had

stretched across all those miles between Morocco and Liberia. She didn't know which version of him she should embrace first.

◆

She saw the life he lived there. She didn't find a legendary fortune or a man who had turned everything he touched into gold. She found a man who had spent years trying, chasing a dream that had always remained a little larger than what he'd achieved. She understood that Adel hadn't lived those years in triumph—but he also hadn't been able to let the dream go.

That made judging him harder, not easier. From Salah, she knew he asked about them and missed them and sometimes cried. Love hadn't prevented the damage. And the damage hadn't erased the love.

◆

Then came the stated reason for the visit. The pilot sat before Adel and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. For a moment, Adel resumed a role from which he'd been absent for so long: a father receiving the man who wanted to marry his daughter. He'd been missing when Lubna left school, when she began working, when she entered the gold trade, when she bought her own shop. Now a woman who'd made her own way sat before him, not the child who'd waited for him to come home.

Lubna didn't know how to feel watching her father in this role. Part of her was happy he'd be present for something that

concerned her future. Another part remembered all the occasions and decisions that had passed without him. She didn't want to spoil the moment by dragging the past into it. Nor could she pretend his absence had left no mark.

◆

Meeting Adel wasn't as simple as it might sound to someone told that a daughter had visited her father after many years. He was a man whose old face and voice she recognized, but whose daily habits and routines acquired far from her were unfamiliar. And to him she was a daughter he'd left as a little girl who had somehow become a woman who traveled, worked, and managed her own affairs.

At ordinary family gatherings, shared memories help fill the silences. Between these two, whole years lay unaccounted for. Neither knew precisely how the other had lived them. She watched his hands when he spoke, trying to connect their movements now with the hands she'd known in the old salon. She recognized something unchanged, then noticed something else that had altered without her witnessing it.

At times she wished she could sit beside him as she'd done in childhood, without thinking about what to say. But she wasn't that child anymore, and he wasn't quite the father she'd known before he went away.

◆

Lubna didn't ask everything she wanted to ask. Some questions weren't suitable in front of the man who'd come to seek her hand. Others were too large for a short visit.

She remembered what she'd heard about the letters when she was fourteen, and the bewilderment those years had left in her. At times she wanted to ask why he'd stayed away so long and how he'd managed to keep living so far from his family. But she feared the question might turn into a quarrel that swallowed the meeting she'd waited years to have.

Her silence wasn't forgetfulness or acceptance of everything that had happened. She chose to postpone her reproaches because she didn't want their first real meeting to mark the beginning of another separation.

She knew longing alone couldn't explain a man staying away. How could he love his family and miss them, yet leave them to face life without him? How could he keep pursuing a dream when he knew he wasn't the only one paying its price?

She found no answer. The years Adel had struggled couldn't erase the hurt his absence had caused. She loved him, and she carried reproaches that hadn't ended. She didn't feel she had to choose between the two.

◆

During the visit, she looked at the place where he worked and tried to understand what had kept him tied to Liberia for so many years. Perhaps the dream of wealth had lasted so long it had become a habit. Perhaps returning after all that time felt

like admitting a failure he couldn't bear to face. But she couldn't know what was inside him without asking.

She didn't ask whether he regretted leaving. She was afraid of hearing an answer she couldn't believe, or of putting a question before him he didn't want to answer. She settled for seeing him as he had become, not as she'd imagined him throughout the years apart.

And she remembered the word she'd spoken when they met: *Dad.* This time it wasn't a call into a house empty of its father or a name used to coax news from a traveler. It had a face she could look at, a voice that answered her, and hands whose movements she could remember. It didn't make up for the years he'd missed. But it was real, and she no longer had to imagine it.

◆

The visit ended and Lubna returned to Morocco. The engagement did not become a marriage; her relationship with the pilot came to an end.

She went back to her shop, her work, and her responsibilities, but the trip remained in her memory for reasons that had nothing to do with marriage. She remembered how her father looked at her, the sound of his voice when he spoke, and the marks of passing years on his features. Sometimes she thought again of the silences between them and wondered whether he'd felt, too, the difficulty of the distance a brief meeting couldn't erase.

Liberia was no longer just a name attached to her father's absence. It was a place she'd seen, where she'd come to know part of his life. Adel was no longer an old image waiting to return. He was a man she'd seen with her own eyes, with all his love, contradictions, frailty, and determination.

She didn't return to Morocco free of reproach. Nor did she bring back a promise that he would come home soon. She returned knowing that meeting him wasn't the end of her questions, but the beginning of a different understanding of her father.

Chapter Thirteen: Curfew

Salah's time beside Adel in Liberia couldn't continue unchanged forever. The closeness that began as an employment opportunity also exposed their differences. Salah was grown now and had opinions of his own. Adel was accustomed to living as he thought best. Friction began to build between them.

◆

Through Adel's barbershop, Salah got to know some of his father's acquaintances connected with the American embassy. In secret, he spoke with them about immigrating to the United States. His request was clear.

“Don't tell my father until I'm gone.”

The arrangements went forward without Adel's knowledge. Then came the day Salah left Liberia for America without warning him.

◆

For Adel, it was a shock. The son who lived with him and helped with the work had suddenly vanished from his daily life. Later, friends at the embassy told him that Salah had

arranged everything with their help and asked them to keep quiet. For a moment, Adel found himself on the other side of absence.

The resemblance between the two departures didn't mean their reasons were identical. But it confronted Adel with a feeling his children knew better than he did: the experience of someone you love making an enormous decision without giving you any part in it. He couldn't turn back time to say what he ought to have told his own family when he left.

Someone he loved had gone after an opportunity and left the news for him to hear after the distance was already there.

◆

Salah began his life in America. Then, in April 1980, news came of a military coup and unrest in Liberia. Whatever differences he had with his father, he couldn't hear that Adel was in danger and stay away. He went back. To his surprise, Lubna had done the same thing, traveling from Morocco after hearing of the turmoil and fearing for their father.

◆

They didn't find Adel where they expected. They asked around until they learned he was near the mines, then went looking for him. Adel raised his eyes. He saw Salah, then Lubna. His expression changed.

“What brought you here?”

“I was worried about you,” she said simply.

He looked at her for a moment, then turned to Salah.

“She needs to leave. Take her to the airport.”

◆

They set off at once, not knowing a curfew had already begun. A road that had seemed at first to be an ordinary route to the airport became an open danger. A group of armed men stopped them and demanded to know why they were outside. Salah explained that his sister needed to reach the airport.

His words weren't enough. Tension rose. Salah took out the cash he had and handed over almost all of it.

In that moment, the money wasn't the price of a journey or a business deal. It was a way out of a situation whose ending no one could predict. Lubna had crossed the distance to Liberia because she feared for her father; now she needed to survive, too. Between those two fears there was no room for the old questions and reproaches.

The men took the money and let them pass.

The reports of war hadn't reached Lubna as distant news from a country that meant nothing to her. Adel was there. Salah was there. And there were years of separation still unresolved. She knew danger didn't distinguish between a man prospecting for diamonds and one working in a barbershop. So she hadn't been content to worry in Morocco. She'd traveled toward Liberia, her fear for her father outrunning every old question about why he had left.

When she met Salah, each of them carried the same purpose in a different way. It wasn't the first time they'd come together because of Adel; Lubna had helped Salah prepare for

his earlier trip. But the circumstances were different now. They weren't asking whether their father was successful or poor. They wanted to know whether he was safe. They had to find him first and decide what to do afterward. Searching for a man near the mines in a country gripped by unrest wasn't like looking for him in a neighborhood barbershop whose address everyone knew.

At last Lubna saw him. The meeting was shorter than she'd hoped. The order to return to the airport came quickly and carried a sharp hurt: she'd crossed the distance to make sure he was all right, only to have to leave before she had much time with him. But she didn't argue. The danger was too great for old grievances to take priority.

On the road to the airport, ordinary things changed their meaning. A route meant to carry passengers toward their flights became a place to cross with caution. Time was no longer a matter of the hour shown on someone's wristwatch; it was a question: Would they arrive before they were forbidden to move? When the armed men stopped them, Lubna didn't know what would happen after the first question. Salah was speaking, and the men standing before him held weapons. She saw how a decision made out of love could put her in danger she'd never imagined.

Salah brought out the money. This wasn't some heroic act he hoped to recount later. It was a practical response to a real trap. Even when the men let them go, the dread didn't disappear. There was still road to cover before reaching the airport, and delays were still possible. When Lubna finally

went inside, leaving the country didn't mean her fear had ended. She had left her father and brother behind, but carried a truth that no longer needed proof: however bitter her reproaches toward Adel, any threat to him would bring her back.

A curfew meant that a city where cars traveled by day could become, after a certain hour, an area no one was allowed to cross. Lubna hadn't known the precise time when she set out with Salah. She'd been thinking of reaching the airport before missing her flight, unaware that the road itself could become the most dangerous obstacle of all. That made the surprise at the checkpoint twice as frightening: armed men, and questions that could not be answered simply to make the journey continue.

Salah had no time to be angry or blame anyone. He did what he could, paid the money, and waited for permission to pass. He had no certainty it would solve the problem, but he could think of nothing else to try. Lubna watched her brother try to protect her after she had come to make sure their father was safe. In a family so often scattered across countries, surviving the road to the airport had become more important than any old dispute.

When she finally reached a place from which she could continue her journey, fear hadn't left her body. But she didn't regret coming. She'd seen Adel and confirmed that he was alive. She'd seen Salah act in a moment of danger. The worry she left behind couldn't be erased by an airport. Every trip to Liberia brought some new knowledge of her father and left

her with another question. This journey left the question of his safety above everything else.

◆

Salah got her to the airport.

“Take care of yourself,” she told him.

Then she went inside. This time she was the one leaving Liberia, with Adel and Salah staying behind. She carried a new picture of the country: her father near the mines, her brother handing over almost all his money to armed men, and an airport road under a curfew they hadn't known about. One truth remained inside her: however angry she became with Adel, all she had to hear was that he was in danger, and she would go to him.

Chapter Fourteen: Close the Shop

Lubna returned from Liberia to Morocco and to her store. The little business she'd bought with money gathered in four days now had its own customers, its own name, and its own rhythm. She bought, sold, calculated, and made decisions. When she made a mistake, it was hers to bear. When she succeeded, she knew the success belonged to her.

Then another man entered her life. A Moroccan who held a senior management position at an international company in the Middle East. The relationship grew serious, and talk turned to marriage.

◆

Lubna was entering marriage with a life she'd already built. But the man had another picture in mind. He told her that getting married would mean giving up work. Closing the shop.

To him, the request sounded like an ordinary way of arranging the life he wanted. To her, it sounded like another door closing. She'd gone from cleaning other people's display windows to owning her own, and she'd learned the cost of independence before she even knew its name. The

disagreement wasn't about working hours. It was about her right to keep something she'd made with her own hands.

Just three words:

“Close the shop.”

But years of her life stood behind them.

◆

They talked. They disagreed. The condition came back again.

Why do I have to choose? she asked herself more than once.

Yet another vision of the future stood before her: a husband, a home, a family, a new life. In the end, she chose marriage.

◆

Lubna's shop was more than a business address. Behind its windows she'd learned to check her own books, make decisions and live with their consequences, and look customers in the eye without feeling smaller than the room. So the demand that she close it was unlike a request whose details could be negotiated. Her future husband wasn't asking her to adjust her hours or hire someone to help. He was asking her to stop practicing the trade that had given her a place in the world.

Even so, her decision wasn't simple. She saw an opportunity to start a family. Perhaps she wanted to give herself a life that didn't begin every morning with ledgers and calculations. She'd spent her childhood and adolescence bearing responsibilities no one her age should have had to carry.

Didn't she have the right to imagine a day when those responsibilities might be different? The question was legitimate. Closing the store, then, wasn't some sudden failure of character. It was a choice she made while weighing two desires she couldn't see how to reconcile.

She knew what she was giving up. She remembered the first loan, the moment the money came together on the fourth day, the merchandise the old owner had supplied, and the debts she'd repaid. None of those things was insignificant. As the day of closing approached, she needed no one to explain what surrendering her workplace meant. She knew exactly. Perhaps that knowledge itself helped her go forward, trying to convince herself that the sacrifice was temporary or that what she'd lost could be replaced.

On the last day, life outside the display window didn't stop to acknowledge her decision. People kept walking past. Neighboring businesses opened as usual. She gathered her belongings and closed the accounts on an entire stage of her life. There was no celebration to mark the end of her work, no speech in which she announced the beginning of something new. There was a key, a display window, and lights being turned off. There was a woman who knew that what she'd made with her own hands would not automatically be there for her if she needed it again.

That was why she remembered the sound of the lock. Not because it was louder than the city's other sounds, but because it separated two lives: one in which she could say *This is my store,* and another in which she would gradually

discover how much of herself she could hold on to while trying to be a wife and mother.

The last day came. She went in that morning and opened the door as she'd done hundreds of times. The same key. The same display window. But everything now carried the word *last*. She reached toward one of the pieces and automatically adjusted its place, then stopped. Tomorrow she wouldn't be here.

◆

At the end of the day, she stood before the glass and saw her reflection. She remembered the girl who'd first entered a jewelry store dressed in mauve with borrowed makeup and heels meant to make her look older. Then the same girl polishing another man's display window. It had taken years to cross to the other side.

Now she was preparing to leave it of her own will.

◆

She switched off the lights one by one. Went outside. Put the key into the lock. Her hand hesitated a moment. Then she turned it.

Click.

Such a small sound for the end of something so large.

She held the key for a moment before slipping it into her bag. She didn't cry. She told herself she wasn't destroying what she'd built, only choosing another beginning.

At that moment, closing the store meant more than losing a business. It meant losing the place where she'd made a name for herself.

Chapter Fifteen: From Morocco to Cairo

Cairo wasn't unkind to Lubna. In Maadi, she built a life for herself: a home, three children, schools, a club, and friends. Her Moroccan husband was a regional director for an international company in Egypt. He traveled frequently, had a wide circle of contacts, and knew businesspeople and prominent figures from many different worlds.

From the outside, life looked orderly.

Cairo offered her daily things to become attached to: the children's route to school, familiar faces, homes she visited and people she welcomed into her own. That life wasn't false simply because her marriage was beginning to go wrong. There were real things in it she loved, and that was what would make leaving, when the time came, harder than it might sound to someone hearing the story from the end.

◆

Her husband was often away. Work explained some of his absences, but not all of them. In time, Lubna learned that there were other women in his life. She refused to let his

absence become the center of her days. She had the children—their schools, homework, schedules, and all the details in which she wanted to be present because she knew what absence did to a child.

◆

Once the children had gone to school, another part of her day began. Maadi. The club. Friendships. Over time, her circle came to include Moroccans living in Cairo, among them artists and performers from the Moroccan arts community based in Egypt.

With these friends she wasn't *Mrs. Regional Director*. She was Lubna.

“Cairo's got a hold on you,” a friend told her once.

Lubna laughed. “Just a little. Morocco will always be Morocco.”

“But you like Maadi.”

She looked around. “I can breathe here.”

◆

At home, meanwhile, the space seemed to be shrinking. Her husband liked to be in control. He had opinions about where she went, whom she spent time with, and which people she ought to know.

“I don't like that friend of yours,” he told her one day.

“Why?”

“I'm not comfortable with her.”

“You're not the one spending time with her. I am.”

“I'm your husband.”

“I know. But that doesn't mean you get to choose every single thing in my life.”

◆

In Maadi, Lubna wasn't living only in anticipation of her husband's return. The children's days gave her a clear structure: school, homework, appointments, and small needs that required their mother's presence. Perhaps that made her all the more determined not to let them feel what she'd felt when Adel disappeared from her days. She knew a child doesn't ask for a perfect life from their parents. A child asks for someone who knows when they'll be home, someone who listens to what happened that day, someone who's there when a question needs an answer.

Not everything she experienced in Cairo was sad. There were genuine friendships, places she loved, and days when she laughed from the heart. The city wasn't merely the backdrop to a marriage starting to fracture. It was a place where her children were growing up, where they knew their streets and schools and had friends of their own. Leaving, when it began to seem possible, wouldn't be a simple move from one house to another. It would uproot the daily life three children had come to know.

Her husband's absences grew longer, and so did the distance between what was said at home and what happened outside it. A man who travels a lot for work doesn't

necessarily give his wife reason to suspect every trip. But suspicion changes when scattered details begin to connect: a name that keeps coming up, attention that goes beyond the demands of a job, attempts to control a wife's life while the husband's private life remains beyond question. Lubna didn't want to spend her days investigating. She couldn't ignore what was becoming obvious, either.

When she confronted him, she wasn't asking for an explanation of his secretary's job description. She was asking how another woman had crossed into their marriage. The answers kept bringing her back to the same question. Vague assurances couldn't restore trust while the facts continued pointing somewhere else. Still, she didn't make her decision immediately. She considered what every step would mean for her children and looked for a way to keep the adults' conflict from becoming a permanent fear in the young ones' lives.

Since childhood, Lubna had known that a house could remain standing while its foundations cracked. This time she didn't want to wait for a complete collapse before thinking about getting out. She was preparing herself for a decision whose date she couldn't yet predict. The need to protect what remained of her life was becoming stronger than her desire to tell herself things would return to the way they'd been.

As his absences grew, his secretary's name came up far too often. At first it was perfectly ordinary: the office, schedules, travel arrangements. Then her name began appearing outside work.

Lubna confronted him.

“Your secretary is getting much too involved in your life.”

“She works with me. Of course she's involved.”

“When something's normal, it looks normal.”

Lubna wasn't naive. But she was also the mother of three children, and a home wasn't something to tear down in one angry moment. She kept weighing everything around her: the children, school, stability, and herself. Her husband continued to move farther away, until the secretary was no longer simply a woman orbiting their household from outside.

Chapter Sixteen: The Lights Are Still On

The truth needed no long explanation. Lubna's husband was no longer merely having an affair with his secretary. He had married her. He had another home.

◆

Lubna confronted him.

“So you've married her?”

He didn't deny it. He began to explain. She waited until he finished, then said, “Then go.”

“What?”

“Go to your other house. You're not staying here.”

“Lubna, let's talk.”

“There's nothing left to talk about. You made your choice. Now I'm making mine.”

He left the house.

◆

Lubna stayed with the children. School, homework, and everyday life continued. But her husband, despite having

moved out, still seemed to know details he shouldn't: where she'd gone, an appointment, a visit. The housekeeper was still there, and the driver still took her places.

She realized information was reaching him through them.

What exhausted her most was not knowing when the details of her own day became the property of a man who had left the house but not his desire to control it. This was no longer simply another marriage or a dispute between spouses. Her need for privacy and safety had become part of every decision she made.

She didn't turn it into a war. She had a larger goal now: to leave Egypt.

◆

She turned to people she trusted and made arrangements quietly. The children were coming with her. That wasn't negotiable. On the day they left, she took only what they needed.

“Mom, are we going somewhere?” one of the children asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Morocco.”

“All of us?”

She looked at the child. “Yes. All of us.”

◆

Before leaving, she kept the lights on. The living-room lights, and others farther inside. Enough to make the house look occupied. Anyone watching from outside would assume they were still there. She needed only a few hours. She left with the children.

It wasn't an easy triumph. She was a mother responsible for three children, carrying a decision larger than the suitcases she'd packed. She wasn't trying to erase the years she'd spent in Cairo. She was trying to prevent the years ahead from being ruled by the same fear.

When Lubna learned her husband had married his secretary, there was no room left for interpretation. It wasn't a rumor she needed to verify or an explanation that might soothe her temporarily. There was another marriage, another home, and still the man wanted influence over the house where she lived with the children. At that point, the disagreement took on a different meaning. The issue was no longer persuading him to understand how he'd hurt her. It was deciding what boundaries she could live within.

After he moved out, the routines continued, but something essential to peace of mind was gone. How did he know where she'd been? Who had told him about an appointment she hadn't discussed with him? The answers she could infer from the behavior of those around her made her more cautious. She didn't want to live in permanent suspicion, or turn the children into witnesses to a struggle that wasn't theirs. So she began planning her departure in silence.

Going back to Morocco required more than buying tickets. She needed somewhere for the children to live, had to decide which necessities to bring and which to leave behind, and had documents that would still matter after they arrived. She checked what each child needed, considered the road to the airport, and chose a time when she could leave without her plans being disrupted. She didn't have to tell the children more than they could bear in that moment. They needed to feel she knew where she was taking them, even if she herself feared what might happen.

She left the lights on. Under other circumstances, forgetting to switch them off might have been an insignificant detail. Here it was a deliberate part of her decision. She didn't want anyone watching the house to notice too quickly that it had emptied. She needed a few hours to pass without trouble. When she stepped outside with the children, there was no time to stand gazing at the door. Everything she did was tied to the next step: the car, the airport, the plane.

When the plane moved, she didn't feel that everything was over. Ahead lay the return to Morocco, children who would need schools, and the professional life she'd once abandoned for marriage. But the most important thing she carried wasn't a suitcase or a document. It was a decision not to let her children pay for the adults' conflict in the way she herself had paid as a child. She knew a new beginning would be difficult. She preferred that difficulty to a life in which she'd lost her peace of mind.

The hardest part of leaving Egypt wasn't choosing a destination. Morocco was familiar, and she had roots there to return to. The hardest part was acting within a limited time without letting the children see how frightened she was. She reviewed the things that couldn't be left behind: identification papers, what they needed on the journey, and enough to get them through the first days after arrival. Every unnecessary item meant a heavier bag; every missing necessity could become a problem later. She didn't have the luxury of forgetting something important and going back for it.

Those hours showed the distance between making a decision and being able to carry it out. A woman may tell herself she's leaving and then discover that getting as far as the door takes careful planning. Lubna knew the difference from her days in business. She could imagine owning a store, but she had to collect its price before the sale. Now she had to turn a wish to leave into steps that attracted no attention: who would help her, when she'd move, how to keep the children's lives as steady as possible.

Leaving the lights on wasn't a heroic trick. It was one of the details of fear. She didn't want to leave a clear sign of her departure before she was far enough away. She wished such precautions hadn't been necessary at all. A home that is supposed to protect you shouldn't be a place you have to slip out of as if someone might forbid you to go. Still, she did what she believed would protect herself and her children, then went forward without knowing whether everything would happen as planned.

After takeoff, she could look at the children's faces instead of over her shoulder. She still didn't know everything rebuilding their lives would demand, but they were with her. That was what made her departure different from Adel's years earlier. She hadn't made a decision that would leave her children waiting. She'd made one that took them with her into a future she was still learning how to create.

Those who could help her did so until she reached the airport. Every passing minute reduced the chance that someone could send her back to the house she'd left.

◆

As the plane climbed, Cairo lay beneath her: Maadi, the schools, the friends, the years. She wasn't fleeing the city. She was leaving a life she no longer wanted.

She looked at her three children. Adel had once left and gone away without his. She was leaving a man, not her children.

And back in Cairo, the lights in the house stayed on for a while, suggesting a presence that was no longer there.

Chapter Seventeen: The Threat

When Lubna arrived in Morocco with her children, she wasn't stepping entirely into the unknown. Before leaving Egypt, she'd secured a home for them. She opened the door, the children came in with their suitcases, and the rooms filled with movement. The first thing had gone right: they had arrived.

She'd arranged the house before departing Egypt because returning without a known roof over their heads would have made the children pay for a decision they hadn't made. The rest of their life she would have to build step by step, as she'd done when she bought her first shop without having all the money to pay for it.

The hardest question remained: how would they live?

◆

She went back to her shop. The space was there, but the display cases were empty. She owned a jewelry store with no jewelry. News of her return reached a friend in the same trade. The woman came by, looked at the windows, and asked:

“You want to start working again?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have merchandise?”

Lubna shook her head.

“I have the store. I just don't have the capital.”

Her friend said, “Give me two days. We'll help you get started.”

◆

Two days later, the friend returned. She wasn't bringing Lubna a fortune as a gift. She was bringing the beginning of a livelihood: gold entrusted to her to sell.

This help wasn't an exact repetition of what had happened when she started with her old jewelry-store owner. Back then she'd been learning and beginning. Now she was returning to a trade she knew after years away, with three children who needed stability. What her friend offered wasn't a solution to everything. It was a chance for Lubna to regain her ability to work.

She would sell the pieces, earn a profit, and repay her friend a little at a time.

“Work,” her friend said. “Sell and make your money. Pay me back gradually.”

“You trust me?” Lubna asked.

Her friend smiled. “If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have come.”

Little by little, the display cases began to fill.

Returning to Morocco wasn't simply going back to the point she'd left. Lubna had changed, and so had her responsibilities. When she'd bought her first shop, she'd worried about her debts and how to repay them. Now she had three children, and any loss at work would immediately reach their home. She couldn't take risks in quite the same way, but she hadn't lost her ability to begin.

Standing before the empty displays, the hardest thing wasn't seeing glass without gold. It was remembering that she'd left the store when it was running, and that the years she'd spent away hadn't waited for her return. Customers changed. Prices changed. Trust had to be earned again. She didn't want to spend too long looking at what she'd lost. First she needed merchandise, then she needed to return to the rhythm of a trade she knew.

Her friend brought that help. There wasn't a document guaranteeing every detail, only their past acquaintance and her friend's faith in Lubna's ability to work. This kind of trust can carry more weight than a bank loan. If you fail, you lose not only money but something in a relationship between two people. Lubna understood that. She treated the gold left in her care as a responsibility, not a present. Each piece sold opened another small door toward independence. Each payment she made relieved an old burden.

Then something arose she hadn't fully accounted for when she left Egypt: her children's school records. She didn't want their education suspended because of her conflict with their father. She returned to Cairo without announcing the trip to

her husband and stayed with a trusted friend. In two short days, she went from institution to institution gathering files, signatures, and dates. There was no time for nostalgia about Maadi or visits to places she loved. It was a specific task, finished when the documents were in her hands.

After she'd returned, she called her husband and told him she'd come and gone without his knowledge. Her purpose wasn't so much to provoke him as to say that his control over the details of her life was no longer an accepted fact. There was something of a recovered voice in the words: the woman once told to close her shop could now open and close a door for herself, travel and return, and protect her children's interests without seeking permission from the man who had left their home.

◆

After she left Egypt with the children, her husband called, furious.

“How could you take the kids and leave?”

“They're with me.”

“I'm their father, too. You have no right.”

He began talking about his position, his connections, and what he could do. She listened, then answered, “Do whatever you want.”

And she hung up.

◆

One problem still connected her to Egypt: the children's school documents. She couldn't complete their enrollment in Morocco without them. She would have to go back to Cairo. This time, she didn't tell him. She contacted an Egyptian friend she trusted.

“Come stay with me,” the friend said.

Lubna went and stayed at her house.

“Just two days,” she told her. “Then I'm going back to my children.”

Over those two days she went from schools to offices, collecting records, signatures, and papers, before returning to the airport. She entered Egypt, slept there for two nights, completed her task, and left. Her husband never knew.

◆

Back in Morocco, she called him.

“There's something I want to tell you.”

“What?”

“I was in Egypt.”

He fell silent.

“When?”

“I stayed two days. Got the kids' school papers sorted out and came back.”

“You came for two days and I didn't know?”

“I came,” she said calmly. “I did what I needed to do, and I left. And you never knew a thing.”

Chapter Eighteen: Bring Me Home

Lubna no longer had to depend on other people for news of Adel. For years now, they had spoken on the telephone. She called him, he asked about the children, and she asked about his health.

“How are you doing, Dad?”

“I'm fine, sweetheart.”

“Are you sure you're fine?”

He would laugh. “What's with the interrogation?”

“I know your voice,” she would say.

◆

Lubna wasn't trying to bring her father back into her life alone. There was Mounir, too: the youngest of her brothers, the baby she'd gone to the pharmacy to buy milk for, even when she had to ask for it on credit. He had grown up in a house preoccupied with absence and need. Lubna grew up beside him in a different role—his sister in name, but in the details of everyday life something closer to a mother.

Years later, Mounir would say that when he cried, he went to Lubna; when he was hungry, he looked for her; when he

needed money or clothes, he went to her before anyone else. He didn't say this to deny Oum Kalthoum's presence or place in his life. He was describing the bond between them. His sister gave him a kind of care and reassurance that made the word *sister* seem too small for what he felt. Lubna, for her part, watched over him with the sense that she was responsible for a child, not merely obligated to help a younger brother.

By 1990, Mounir was twenty-six. He was a man now, but the image of his father in his memory was little more than an old absence; he'd been so young when Adel left. He wanted to see him, not in family stories or news from Liberia, but face-to-face. Lubna didn't let the wish become another promise postponed indefinitely. She arranged his trip, bought his plane ticket, and sent him to Liberia.

It wasn't an ordinary vacation. For Mounir, it was a chance to know the man whose name he'd heard all his life without knowing him as a son knows a father. For Adel, the arrival of a son he'd left as a child was nothing like a routine visit from a relative. Both were overjoyed. Time had carried them into two very different ages, but at last they had the opportunity to sit facing one another, free of letters, stories, and what others carried between them.

Lubna wasn't physically there for the meeting, but her actions were. She had opened the way between them, as she did whenever she could bring one family member closer to another. She couldn't recover the years Adel and Mounir had

lost, but she could give them a beginning they would remember.

◆

Adel remained in her heart despite everything his absence had done. She could know all his mistakes and still move at once if she heard he needed something. Then the war spread and the danger grew worse.

Her worry was different from the worry she'd known as a child, when she asked people returning from Liberia whether they knew her father. They were in contact now. She could hear his voice. But a telephone couldn't stop a war or close the distance between an aging man and a country where staying had become dangerous.

Life in Liberia was no longer possible. Adel fled to Guinea. He didn't go there to settle or look for another mine. He arrived wanting one thing: Morocco.

◆

When he spoke with Lubna, she asked, “Did you get there safely?”

“Thank God.”

“Where are you now?”

“In Guinea.”

“And what are you going to do there?”

“Nothing. I don't want to stay.”

Then he said, “I just want to go back to Morocco.”

“For good?”

“Yes, sweetheart. That's enough. I've had enough of living away from home.”

She didn't ask why he'd taken so many years to reach that point.

“What do you need right now?” was all she said.

◆

He needed money and a ticket.

“If you can help me—”

“Don't say another word,” she interrupted. “I'll take care of it.”

She finished what she was doing at the store and began arranging the funds and his flight. It didn't take long. Adel hadn't gone to Guinea to begin another life, and Lubna wasn't going to leave him there a day longer than necessary.

A few days later, she called.

“Get ready.”

“For what?”

“To come home. To Morocco.”

He was silent.

“You booked it?”

“Yes.”

When he spoke again, his voice was softer.

“God bless you, my daughter.”

“Just get here safely.”

◆

On the day of his flight, she called again.

“Everything ready?”

“Ready.”

“Do you have your ticket?”

“Yes.”

“And the money?”

“Yes.”

“You haven't forgotten anything?”

He paused, then laughed.

“My girl, what do I have left that I could possibly forget?”

“All that matters is you coming home. Nothing else matters.”

◆

Adel reached the airport and called her.

“I'm at the airport now.”

“Are you inside?”

“Yes.”

“Everything okay?”

“Everything.”

Then he said, “I'll see you in Morocco, sweetheart.”

She smiled.

“God willing. And this is the last time I'm going to have to ask where you are.”

He laughed. “All right.”

She ended the call. This time he wasn't going away. He was coming back.

When Mounir had prepared for his visit to Liberia, he carried questions unlike Lubna's. She remembered their father in the salon and knew how he'd smiled whenever he saw her. Mounir had only what others had told him. His picture of Adel came from the family's stories, the names of places he'd lived, and the absence itself. The ticket his sister arranged was therefore more than transportation. It was an opportunity, at twenty-six, to begin making memories of his father that belonged to him alone.

Lubna didn't claim she could repair the years they'd lost. She knew she couldn't. But she could make a meeting possible, and she did. Mounir didn't need a lesson in forgiveness before boarding the plane. He needed to see his father's face and hear his voice from close by. Perhaps as Lubna made his travel arrangements she remembered her own first journey to Adel, when she'd gone with a man who wanted to marry her, only to find that the question of her father was larger than any stated purpose for the visit.

Chapter Nineteen: At Last, He Came Home

When Adel emerged through the arrivals gate, Lubna saw him before he saw her. A small suitcase in his hand. Slower steps. Hair that had turned white. He raised his eyes.

“Lubna.”

The word came out of her just as it had when she was little.

“Dad.”

She embraced him. An airport wasn't a place for reproaches. It was enough that he had come home.

◆

On the drive, he kept looking out the car window.

“The country's changed,” he said.

“So have you.”

He smiled. “Time passes, sweetheart.”

◆

Adel didn't know how to sit still for long without working. He started asking about the salons again.

“You never lose a trade,” he told Lubna.

“You can still work?”

He raised his fingers as if holding a pair of scissors.

“These hands still remember what to do.”

And he did go back to working in a few salons.

◆

Then he chose Marrakesh as the place to settle. He no longer wanted a new country or another opportunity beyond a border. In Marrakesh he married an older woman. It was a quiet marriage, closer to companionship at a stage of life when he no longer felt a need to prove anything to anyone. A house to return to. A city that stayed put.

Now Lubna could say, “Dad's in Marrakesh.” She no longer needed to ask people returning from Liberia if they had news of him.

◆

But she didn't want him to return to Morocco only to live apart from the family that had grown up during his absence. Lubna's three children were adults now. Her oldest daughter had married and had a son and a daughter. Her middle son lived independently in a house near hers. Her youngest son had settled in Canada.

Lubna brought Adel together with them for birthdays, lunches, and celebrations. On one occasion she called to him.

“Dad, come take a picture with us.”

He waved a hand. “Let the kids have their picture.”

She laughed. “And where do you think you're going? Come here.”

He stood among them. This was the picture Lubna wanted: Adel surrounded by family, not standing before a mine in some faraway country.

◆

Nor did her care for Mounir stop with the journey that had brought him and their father together. Later, she helped her brother travel to Sweden on a tourist visit. There he met a woman who would become his wife. He settled in Sweden and continued to live there. Lubna couldn't plan everything that might happen in a new country. But once again she'd helped him cross a doorway without knowing what waited on the other side.

No matter how far Mounir went, he never changed the words he'd chosen to describe his relationship with Lubna. After all those years, he still said he considered her his mother. Not because he'd forgotten Oum Kalthoum, but because he hadn't forgotten the sister he went to as a child when he was hungry or crying, the sister who bought him a ticket to meet his father when he was grown. To him, motherhood wasn't always just a name or a blood relationship. It was also a hand reaching out when you needed it.

Whenever Mounir spoke of his sister, he returned to the name he'd given her since he was little: *my second mother*.

◆

Lubna visited her father in Marrakesh. Sometimes they would sit together for a long time before conversation turned to the years they hadn't shared. She didn't need an elaborate introduction. Mentioning one of her brothers, or a day in their old house, was enough for the absence to find its way into the room.

She asked him about leaving. About the children he'd left behind. About the money that stopped coming. About the news he had heard without verifying it. The questions weren't new to her. What was new was speaking them to him as he sat before her, rather than to a picture in her memory.

He tried to answer, but his voice broke. He cried. This wasn't a man weeping over a remote incident. This was a man who still struggled to face what had happened. Lubna waited, but she didn't withdraw her questions.

He said he had been weak. He offered no explanation that softened the harshness of the word. He knew he'd wronged his daughter and his family, and he said so through tears.

Lubna wasn't searching for a verdict in her favor. She wanted to understand how her father had been able to leave all those years behind, then go on living while believing things at home were fine. She remembered the man who'd told her at fourteen, *Forget your father. He's forgotten all of you.* She remembered the envelopes she had been told arrived but were never opened.

She told Adel of the hurt and reproach she still carried. She cried, too. His face before her was the face of the father she knew, yet it couldn't bring back the man she'd waited for near the school gate, or give Mounir the childhood with his father he'd never had.

When her tears grew harder, Adel told her, “What I was trying to achieve—you achieved it.”

She knew what he meant. He'd gone to Liberia in pursuit of diamonds and wealth. She, after years of work, learning, losses, and fresh starts, had ended up owning a business in gold and diamonds. His words didn't mean their paths had been alike. They said nothing about the price the family had paid.

Was he congratulating her? Trying to ease her hurt? Perhaps both. She didn't ask. She kept crying, and he sat before her, unable to give her back the years he'd missed.

Adel hadn't returned to Morocco carrying a complete explanation for his life. He'd returned exhausted by the years, his hands still remembering the trade he'd learned long ago. It made sense that he would go back to barbering. When a dream you've chased for so long slips away, sometimes you return to what you know—not because you've achieved that first dream, but because what you know allows you to begin another day. Lubna didn't need to see him succeed professionally to be glad he was near.

He chose Marrakesh and settled there. He had an address no one needed to ask travelers from across the sea to find.

Visiting him no longer required a plane ticket to Liberia. It was an enormous change for the family, even if it looked simple: a daughter knew where to find her father. But the smaller physical distance did not erase the other distance created by the years. There were still things to say, and things no one might ever be able to say completely.

When Lubna brought Adel together with her children and grandchildren, she wasn't trying to create the portrait of a perfect family untouched by absence. She wanted the younger generations to have a chance to know their grandfather as someone present in their lives. Photographs of him standing among them couldn't replace the images missing from her childhood, but they could keep everything from being lost once again. Each gathering offered something of the ordinary life she'd been denied for so long: food, conversation, people calling one another by name without anyone having to ask where the missing man was.

Facing the past was neither a celebration nor a trial. When Lubna asked her father about the years he'd left them, she didn't want a ready-made sentence to stand in for her memories. She wanted to understand how he had gone on living knowing he had children growing up without him. Adel wept and said he'd been weak, that he'd wronged them. His tears weren't proof that everything had been resolved. But they were something she'd needed to hear from him back when it mattered most.

When he told her she'd achieved what he'd sought, it wasn't a comforting conclusion. He had traveled to look for

diamonds. She had found her way into the gold-and-diamond trade by another route, one that began with leaving school, cleaning display windows, and working hard. The comparison acknowledged her achievement, and perhaps he hoped it would console her. But no one could turn a daughter's success into compensation for her father's absence. So the scene left room for tears after words, and for love beside questions without either cancelling the other.

Adel, weeping in Marrakesh, couldn't recover the man he'd been in his children's eyes. He could say he'd made mistakes, admit his weakness, and look at the daughter who had helped carry the family in his absence. But even the most sincere admission couldn't change the fact that Lubna had left school, couldn't give Mounir a childhood with his father, and couldn't make Oum Kalthoum forget the years she'd spent trying to keep the household going. Those truths remained present without anyone needing to name them each time.

Lubna's tears didn't mean she had failed to move beyond the past in every way. She had overcome a great deal. She had learned, worked, owned a store, married and had children, left a marriage in which she no longer felt safe, and returned to her trade. But she couldn't erase the little girl who kept asking where her father was. A person can grow older and learn how to live well, and still have a corner inside that all the experience in the world cannot reach. It was that corner of Lubna that spoke when she sat before Adel.

That was why his words—*What I was trying to achieve, you achieved*—weren't a victory for either of them. He had

traveled in pursuit of diamonds. She had reached them by a road that began with a painful encounter in a jeweler's shop. The two roads weren't alike in their costs or their choices. Perhaps he'd wanted to congratulate her. Perhaps he hoped to soften the hurt of the years by saying that something good had come from it all. But Lubna didn't need her success explained as the result of his absence. She had succeeded *in spite of* his absence, not because that absence had been some hidden gift.

After that confrontation, not every meeting became a reckoning with the past. They could speak about health, grandchildren, and ordinary matters of the day. There was a kind of practical reconciliation in that, even if it answered none of the larger questions. Having him nearby meant she could see him when she wanted, sometimes feel angry with him in private, and love him at the same time. She no longer had to choose one emotion and erase the rest. That was the most human truth about their relationship: it didn't end with the tears of confession, and it didn't begin again as though nothing had happened.

The days that followed included ordinary things: asking after one another's health, sharing meals, posing for pictures with the grandchildren, and exchanging news by telephone. The love endured. The questions did not disappear. In a way, that was the form of relationship they'd managed to reach.

As the years passed, Adel stopped working in the salons. His relationship with the trade that had accompanied him for so long changed. He began spending more time at the mosque.

He let his beard grow. His hair turned white. He no longer spoke of mines as he had in his younger days.

He became the *muezzin*, the man who calls the faithful to prayer, at a mosque in Marrakesh. He said that drawing closer to God was the best thing he'd found at this stage of life, and that much of what used to preoccupy him had lost its value after everything that had passed.

Those words didn't erase what had happened in Morocco and Liberia. Nor was Lubna asking him to become the man he'd once been. Sometimes it was enough simply to know where she could find him. The questions could return another day.

Chapter Twenty: Worth More Than Diamonds

Canada wasn't unfamiliar to Lubna. Since her youngest son settled there, she had visited whenever she could—sometimes for a week, sometimes just a few days—before returning to Morocco. But her trip in 2026 was different. This time, she was going for the birth of his son.

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She stayed for about a week to ten days. When the baby arrived, she was there beside her son. She held the newborn in his first days and studied his tiny face.

“Now you're really a father,” she told her son.

He laughed. “And you've got another grandchild.”

She smiled as she rocked the baby.

“May God keep him safe for you.”

Then she returned to Morocco.

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Nearly three months passed, but she kept thinking that the baby hadn't been celebrated in Morocco the way she wanted. She could have told herself the time for that had passed.

But Lubna had spent so much of her life postponing happiness because life always demanded something more urgent: food, rent, milk for a baby, an absent father, a store that needed saving, a marriage that had to be endured, an escape that had to be planned.

Now she didn't want to postpone joy as well.

She knew better than most that happiness doesn't always arrive when a family expects it, and that arriving late doesn't take away its right to be welcomed. She wasn't simply trying to make up for a small party she'd missed. She wanted to tell her children and grandchildren that a family that had learned to be patient also deserved to learn how to celebrate.

“Joy doesn't have an expiration date,” she said. “Let's celebrate him now.”

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The arrival of a new grandchild was no small piece of news in Lubna's life. She'd grown accustomed to measuring time by the ages of the children she cared for: Mounir, for whom she'd carried home milk; then her own three children; then the grandchildren who now filled the house with their voices. In every generation she saw something continuing, even when the past could never be brought back. To her, motherhood wasn't one role that ended when children grew up. It was a

relationship whose shape changed while the care and affection remained.

In Canada, she'd watched her youngest son enter a new stage of life. He was the same little boy who'd traveled beside her when she left Egypt, and now he was a man living far away and starting a family of his own. This separation didn't resemble Adel's absence. Her son stayed in touch, knew the way home, and she knew where to find him. She could be happy for him without fearing that travel would turn into disappearance. When she held the newborn, she didn't see him as a replacement for anyone. She saw a life beginning, a life that deserved to be received with love.

Back in Morocco, the thought of a celebration stayed with her. A delay of three months was no reason to let the occasion pass. She knew customs assigned people certain times for certain rituals, but joy did not lose its meaning when the date slipped by. As long as the baby hadn't been celebrated among the relatives and friends in Morocco the way she wanted, she could create an occasion that brought them all together.

She imagined a celebration unmistakably Moroccan in spirit, not a hurried family gathering: traditional clothing, music, relatives' faces, and the details of hospitality that turn an evening into a memory people speak of long afterward. She wasn't trying to copy anyone else's parties. She wanted what suited her taste and the customs she loved about her country. Perhaps there was also something in that choice of reclaiming an old right—the right to feel happy without apologizing for it.

Her happiness didn't erase what she'd lived through. She no longer needed to prove to anyone how much she'd endured. Those who knew her knew the road she'd traveled. This time she wanted to stand among them not to manage a crisis or find missing money, but to welcome a new child and hear laughter fill the room. That was reason enough to throw a grand celebration and let the guests call it whatever they liked: a delayed *sboua*, the traditional celebration for a new baby, a small wedding, or simply a night of joy that needed no more precise name.

Once she'd decided, she made it feel more like a full Moroccan wedding than an ordinary newborn celebration. An elegant family party steeped in traditional Moroccan customs. Caftans, embroidery, incense, tea and sweets, and joyful ululations. Lubna wanted a generous occasion, a chance to welcome her grandson among family and friends in her own way.

The room filled with friends and loved ones, including a famous Moroccan folk singer. When the music began, the clapping grew louder and people gave themselves over to the celebration.

“This isn't a baby party anymore, Lubna,” someone told her. “It's a wedding!”

She laughed. “Then let it be a big celebration.”

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For a moment, Lubna stood at the edge of the hall. She heard the music and laughter and watched her family moving

between the tables. This time there was no bill in her hand that had to be paid before evening. She lifted the hem of her caftan a little and walked toward them.

Adel wasn't there for the celebration. Even so, the evening went on, filled with all its sounds.

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A few days later, Lubna accompanied one of her grandchildren to school. All the way there, he talked about his classmates. At the gate, he hurried ahead.

“It's okay, Grandma. I can go in by myself.”

“Go on, sweetheart. Pay attention to your schoolwork.”

He turned, waved to her, then disappeared among the children.

She remained standing outside the gate. She didn't see herself in his face. She saw only a schoolbag on a small back and a road he was free to continue down. From some place memory had kept alive all those years, her mother's words returned: *Take off your school clothes.*

Lubna adjusted the edge of her scarf and looked at the gate once more.

Children were still filing in. The gate hadn't closed yet.

She turned and walked away.

In Morocco, Loubna grows up in the shadow of an absence: a father who left for Liberia, taking with him promises, unanswered questions, and a silence that weighs on the family.

From the wounds of childhood to her earliest responsibilities, from the jewelry trade to cherished memories, from Casablanca to Cairo, she moves through loss, separation, and new beginnings—sustained by a quiet strength that refuses to give way.

Inspired by true events, Tektab Alayya is a moving novel about memory, exile, and the dignity of women—and about the slow transformation of pain into light.

Hossam Nageeb