

## CHAPTER 4

Ten minutes.

That's how long we've been given to pack up our lives, to leave our home. To prepare for relocation. How do we even begin? That's not even time enough to say good-bye.

Suit #1's voice blasts at us as we begin to walk upstairs to collect our things. "Only the necessities. One bag per person." He turns away, stops, and yells back, "Guards are posted in the front and back."

My parents and I continue up the stairs quietly. There are no more words. I feel like a fish that's been caught on a line and slapped onto a stone. My tail flaps; my body lurches. I'm about to be gutted, and all I can do is watch the knife coming for me.

My dad silently ushers all of us into my room. My eyes

scan this space that suddenly feels like it's not the place I've spent every night for over a decade. The nightstand is left open on my bed, the disheveled *kantha* quilted black cotton scarf with red roses embroidered on it is plugged into the nightstand. My phone. David. I reach for him. I stutter-step toward my phone.

Boots stomp up the stairs.

"No," my mom whispers, snatching the phone from my hands. There's no time to protest, let alone tap out a message. I can only watch, wide-eyed, as my phone falls to the floor, hitting the carpet with a soft thud and a bounce that sends it on the bare wood floor under my bed. I drop to my hands and knees to reach for it amid the dust and detritus.

"I'll take your phones now." I look up. It's the British soldier in a khaki Army uniform steps into my room, hands behind his back. His jaw juts out, showcasing a prominent underbite. My dad reaches into his pocket and turns over to the guard. He doesn't make eye contact with the guard, or with my mom.

"My... my phone—" Mom stumbles over her feet and clears her throat. "It's on the small table in the hallway." She takes my dad's hand, and they step a little closer. My mom reaches for me. I take her hand and let her help me to standing. She nods at me. I look down at my phone in its bejeweled rubber case, the scratches on the glass screen, the screensaver of David and me—a selfie of us on a bed taken from here. His arm is around my shoulders, I'm



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scan this space that suddenly feels like it's not my own, not the place I've spent every night for over a decade. The book left open on my bed, the disheveled *kantha* quilt, the long black cotton scarf with red roses embroidered on it, my phone plugged into the nightstand. My phone. David. I need to tell him. I stutter-step toward my phone.

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"I'll take your phones now." I look up. It's the Boots. A man in a khaki Army uniform steps into my room, hand extended. His jaw juts out, showcasing a prominent underbite.

My dad reaches into his pocket and turns over his phone. He doesn't make eye contact with the guard, or with me or my mom.

"My... my phone—" Mom stumbles over her words, then clears her throat. "It's on the small table in the foyer." She takes my dad's hand, and they step a little closer to me. My mom reaches for me. I take her hand and let her pull me to standing. She nods at me. I look down at my phone, the bejeweled rubber case, the scratches on the glass surface, the screensaver of David and me—a selfie of us on a hike not far from here. His arm is around my shoulders, I'm flashing a



peace sign, and we both have these goofy grins on our faces. There's a tightness in my chest. There's a deep coldness in my bones, and my blood is like ice.

My mom turns to me and carefully unwraps each of the fingers that clutch my phone. My knuckles are white. Without another word, she gives my phone to the guard.

"Ten minutes," the guard barks at us, and then turns and walks out my door.

My dad pauses, then quietly shuts the door. We're alone, the three of us, in my room. I burst into tears. My parents surround me, wrapping their arms around each other and me. One of them kisses the top of my head; I'm not sure who. The other kisses my forehead.

I don't know anything anymore. I don't even know if this is real. I can't feel my body. It's like I'm watching all of this from outside myself. And it seems like it should be science fiction.

"We only have a few minutes," my dad says, his voice cracking as he releases us from his embrace.

"Take what you think you'll need, *beta*," my mom says, stepping back.

A vise grips my heart. What I need? I need all the things I can't have.

My dad takes my mother's free hand. They look at me, ashen-faced, red-eyed. They are about to walk out, but my mom returns to me, grabs my hand, and motions for my dad to take the other. In this small circle of our family, my mom

turns first to me, then my dad, silently, her eyes glistening with tears. She starts to whisper a prayer.

My Arabic isn't so good, besides memorizing *duas* and prayers. But this one I know because it was always on my lips. She even carried a copy of this verse in her pocket on a little laminated card. The Verse of the Throne. The prayer of the Throne. My *nanni* used to tell me that this was one of the most powerful verses of the Quran. That whoever recited it would be under God's protection. My dad once told me about the poetic symmetry of the verse. You should imagine yourself walking through the verse, he said, stopping at the beginning, the middle line: *He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them*. When you read the first line before and the four lines after, you'll see how, thematically, they are concentric circles that loop around that middle line.

I may not be the most stalwart of Muslims, and my religious practice may waver, but this *dua*—maybe because of my dad's reminder of Nanni reciting it as she would blow the prayer over me—this one always gives me a sense of calm, but sometimes more, too. Like my *nanni*'s voice endowed each of my prayers with the strength of her belief, like the words were talismans. I reach out for that peace right now, that strength, but I can't. It's like grasping at air.

"We have to hurry," my dad says when my mom finishes the short verse.

"Can you do this?" my mom asks. "Do you need my help?"



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I don't know anything anymore. I don't even know if this is real. I can't feel my body. It's like I'm watching all of this happen from the outside. I hide myself. And it seems like it should be science.

"I only have a few minutes," my dad says, his voice soft. He releases us from his embrace.

"What do you think you'll need, *beta*," my mom says, looking at me. I nod. "Back."

She grips my heart. What I need? I need all the things I can't have. I need to be loved.

My dad takes my mother's free hand. They look at me, at each other, red-eyed. They are about to walk out, but my mom turns to me, grabs my hand, and motions for my dad to follow her. In this small circle of our family, my mom

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No, I want to say. I can't do this. I won't. My heart is breaking, but underneath there's this flickering flame of fury, too. How can we do this? How can you go along with this? I want to yell at my parents.

But I whisper, "I don't understand how this is happening." My voice is barely a scratch. "How can we be dangerous to the state? A poet, a chiropractor, and a high school senior?"

"It's not about danger. It's about fear. People are willing to trade their freedom, even for a false sense of protection." My dad shakes his head. "'There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.'"

"What does that even mean?" Behind the terror, I can feel the flames of anger, burning, rising. How can we resign ourselves to this?

"It's John Adams. He meant democracy is fragile. All we can do right now is go along." My dad turns to the window and raises his eyebrows. "They've stationed police outside the door. If we don't cooperate, it will be much, much worse for all of us."

"Hurry, *beta*," my mom says as she and my dad rush out to pack up their lives in suitcases.

My head spins. My chest rises and falls, which is the only way I know I'm still breathing and standing here in the middle of my room. The bed's not made. I can't leave without making the bed. Who cares about the fucking bed? Why didn't I text David? Does he know? How am I

supposed to leave here without telling him? Will he be disappeared?

Suit #1 told us where we are going. A relocation. Near Manzanar.

He used Manzanar like a landmark. Like the words in everyday. Like "sun" and "grass" and "sky." Words y million times without thinking. Like the irony was in him, because our world has no more irony in it.

Only minutes are left, and I have to figure out what. But for how long? A couple of days? A month? The Americans were interned until World War II ended. Shit. Could it be years?

I grab the biggest duffel I have and start filling it with jeans, T-shirts, socks, underwear, pajamas. My black A zip-up fleece. How cold does it get? Shoes. What hat. Gloves. What do I need? How am I supposed to take Books. We can have books, right? I grab a couple from my nightstand, knocking over a digital frame displaying a picture of David and me at homecoming. I pick it up and hold it to my chest. I feel giant sobs coming but I can't. I don't have time. I put the frame back on the nightstand, not sure if they allow pictures at... at they're taking us. What if they confiscate it? I'd rather be here, at home, safe. Intact. From my desk, I snatch a few pens and a blank notebook.

There's a knock on my door. My mom.



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of pens and a blank notebook.

There's a knock on my door. My mom.



“Dad’s downstairs. We have to go.”

I’m not ready. This is mad. I can’t go. “Mom.” My voice breaks. She moves toward me, but I hold up my palm, and she stops.

“Make sure you remember socks and underwear.” She gives me a small, wan smile.

Socks and underwear. I wonder if all moms do this—try to make the terrifying seem mundane. She steps away. She knows that I need a moment.

I look around the room. There’s a little bit of space left in my duffel, so I take some rolls of washi tape and a blank journal I got in Paris last summer. The cover has a drawing of a girl and her dog curled up on a giant pot of red jam. The label says CONFITURE DE MOTS. I glance at my bookshelf—the yearbooks, my shoebox of notes and cards from David. I saved every note David ever passed to me in school. He laughed and called me a romantic when I asked him to write me notes instead of texting. But I love the notes. Each one is a little gift. A tangible surprise that doesn’t eat up gigs on my phone. And now I’m leaving them forever? For someone else to look at? What happens to our house? Will it be searched? Is it still ours?

Too many questions and no answers. And I desperately want to take that box with me, but there is no room and no time.

A door shuts downstairs, and my mom calls up for me.

I pick up my duffel and turn off the light. But before the door, I go back and straighten the *kantha* quilt on the bed. I see Fluffy—a brown stuffed dog with one ear almost missing—who joined me on my first day of nursery school. He was the only way I’d allow my parents to leave; he made me feel secure. My impulse is to take him. But I leave Fluffy on the pillow, where he has spent thousands of nights, in a place that was once safe.

I stomp down the stairs. I reach into my pocket, and I try to grab the phone that isn’t there. I clench my empty hand into a fist, and a tear plops onto my knuckle. What if I text David if I even had a chance? Good-bye? I’ll find me?

I meet my parents in the foyer.

There are a million shards in my heart, but the one that really stabs is having my damn phone taken away. It’s so dumb to think of it this way, but it’s not only my phone, it’s all my pictures, every memory of school and tennis and David. I stifle my sobs. Dread clutches me, but so do relief and hope. They didn’t merely take my phone; they took my choice.

An invisible hand pushes us outside the door. The air is so quiet here. That’s one thing I always liked about the town. The crickets in summer, the trees whispering in the breeze. You can actually see stars. But not tonight. There is only dark sky.



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tle town. The crickets in summer, the trees whispering on the  
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there is only dark sky.



I take a last look inside. A guard has his hand on our door-knob. On our door. He's going to pull it closed. But...the dishes. Are there still dishes in the sink? I can't remember if we loaded the dinner plates into the dishwasher. Will someone do the dishes? My mom hates leaving dishes overnight.

The door slams behind us. My parents don't even look.

I swing my head around. There are cars at the curb, the van we saw earlier, and more Exclusion Guards. The Suits. The Suits are conferring with the chief of police. There is talking around me, I hear words, but the words don't make sense. Like everyone is speaking in tongues. My parents shuffle me into the backseat of the chief of police's car and shut the door. There's no air. I try to open the door, but apparently you can't open the backseat doors from the inside of a police car. So I watch as my parents exchange words with Suit #1, who hands them some papers. Then they turn to the chief, who also has something to say, but seems to be having a hard time looking my parents in the eye. We know the chief. We've known him since his daughter, Ivy, and I were in kindergarten together. My dad nods. My mom stares at him blankly. Then the chief opens the back door for them, and they slide in next to me. I move over to make space for them. We don't look at one another. We don't say anything. It's like we're all in mourning, but for different things, in our own way.

The chief starts up the car. I see something, someone running toward us. I squint into the darkness. I can't see.

David? Could it be David? Does he know? Did he see me?

The chief pulls the car away from the curb.

I yell David's name, but the chief doesn't respond like no one can hear me. I strain to see, but the chief's light on inside the car, and all I can see is the reflection of a girl who doesn't really look like me. I try to roll the window down, but it won't roll down. I look at the girl in the reflection; her face is puffy and red, and her watery reflection looks like a ghost. I look at my parents; they're ghosts, too. The car has shattered, and all that's left is this alternate universe of broken people with nothing to hold on to.



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## CHAPTER 5

We are silent for a long time as we pass through the town center to head onto the highway to Los Angeles. Car lights whiz by us. Even in the middle of the night, there's traffic in LA. The chief is in the right lane, driving impossibly slow, like he's trying to prolong the ride to scare us more. But he doesn't really need to bother. There's so much anxiety in this car that it feels like the backseat is shrinking, crushing us into a small cube of vinyl and sweat and fear.

The chief clears his throat. "Now, you all know I'm sorry about this, um, formality. Doing my job, following orders that come from above my pay grade. I'm sure you folks will be cleared in no time. The bigwigs need to see you're not a threat."

He's trying to fill the silence because he's uncomfortable, but all he's done is make it worse. My dad continues to stare

at his own feet. My mom takes his hand. Say something, I want to tell them. Call him out. He knows us. Ask him to do this. I watch my parents, but they don't say anything.

I look at my palms, tracing the remnants of the cent marks that I pressed into my own skin. Words are stuck in my gut to my throat, and they taste bitter.

"How's Ivy?" I ask the chief.

My parents both swing their heads in my direction. My mom grabs my hand and squeezes it, an indication to stop talking—but fear and anger are waging a war in my head right now, and I can't stop myself. If I can't leave the car, I have to hear the chief's "following orders" excuse, which I can do, the one thing I can do, is remind him that I can do, us. He's "escorting" us away from our whole life, and I think it's my job to make him feel comfortable and safe, even if my mom is giving me the death stare to silence me.

"Did she decide on a college yet?" I don't have the acting skills to make my voice sound chirpy, like I'm happy, so my delivery is totally deadpan, which I suppose is how I feel.

I see the chief glance into his rearview mirror, avoid eye contact with him for a second before he looks at me. Fine. Thanks for asking. Not quite settled on a school yet.

"Yeah," I say. "I know the feeling."

Maybe my mom is right when she says I'm stubborn for no reason. I imagine they aren't talking to me that way because they're afraid something worse could happen.



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"Yeah," I say. "I know the feeling."

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thing because they're afraid something worse could happen.



I'm not sure what else we can lose, but if I'm being honest, I'm terrified that we'll find out.

Union Station in Los Angeles is an art deco-mission revival mash-up wonder of inlaid marble tile, vaulted wood ceilings, and light fixtures that would make Frank Lloyd Wright proud. We've been here before. Normally, I'd close my eyes, ignoring the gum wrappers and wadded-up tissues that litter the sticky floor, to wonder at this echo of a time when people dressed up for dinner on trains with names like the *Sunset Limited* and the *Pacific Sunrise*, when train travel was romantic and featured in black-and-white movies. But now, as I stand outside in the broken quiet of the night, my synapses are firing with a million questions at once. I wrap my arms around my body, literally trying to hold myself still because my fight-or-flight adrenaline is in overdrive and I don't know which way it's going to lead me. Both, I think.

There are guards here, too. Same as the ones who were at my house, but more. Dozens more. This time, under the glare of extra lights that have been set up outside, I focus so I see them more clearly. There's been increased security in public places—airports, train stations, even shopping malls. Somehow, seeing soldiers with giant guns strapped across their chests always makes me feel more scared and less safe. Maybe scaring people is part of the plan. But the soldiers here, the Exclusion Guards—their sandstone-colored uniforms look crisp, new. Jacket, pants, cap, boots, and bulletproof vest,

like the kind the police have, but more heavy-duty shiny black plates across the front, like something might wear. Our military is diverse, but not this branch. They're all white, it seems. A victory for nationalists longing for the "good old days" of segregated separate bathrooms.

A gauntlet of guards lines the sidewalks to the some at the curb, others with their backs to the street. Their eyes alert. Their fingers aren't on the trigger. The air is so charged, it feels that way. I notice an American flag patch on each soldier's sleeve, and below that a small angle with EXCLUSION AUTHORITY embroidered in black.

Outside the main entrance of the train station is a security checkpoint—a series of desks. That's what the chief means. There are a couple dozen other people lined up, each with a bag in hand. Some other desis, an African American man, a few people who look like they might be from the Midwest. It's after midnight, and everyone looks exhausted, tired, lagged. And it's quiet—so quiet you can hear the hum of makeshift lighting that has been set up outside.

"This is where I leave you," the chief says, as if pointing us off for vacation instead of pointing us toward the station that shows people where to line up according to the sign. Which is next to a sign with enumerated instructions on what to do. This is Los Angeles; I'm used to seeing signs in multiple languages. But here, English only. And the chief gestures us toward a c



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"This is where I leave you," the chief says, as if he's drop-  
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English only. And the chief gestures us toward a damn desk,



so casually. As if men with giant guns meant to keep us quiet and herded in is normal. It's not normal. So why are people acting like it is?

The chief extends his hand toward my dad, who takes it in his own—but when I see my dad's face, he seems almost as surprised as I am that's he's acquiesced to this handshake. Maybe it's a reflex he couldn't help.

"Good luck, Ali," the chief says, then quickly darts away, as if *he's* the one who is afraid of *us*. The irony is not lost on me.

"Thanks for your service, Chief." I don't hide my sarcasm. My mom shushes me even though the chief is probably no longer in earshot.

"Layla, you really need to watch your tone," she whispers. "You're far too sarcastic for your own good. There might be a time for it, but it's certainly not right now."

I shake my head. "Mom, I think tone policing is the least of our problems."

"Maybe," my dad adds. "But your mom is right. Don't draw attention to yourself. We need to blend in if we're going to get through this."

*This?* I don't suppose any of us know what to call the experience yet. Like World War I wasn't called that when people were fighting it. How could it have been, when they didn't know what would come after? Anyway, probably no one is thinking about an appropriately weighty yet catchy phrase to call our quagmire right now. We're all too busy looking away

and trying to believe it's a collective nightmare we will eventually wake up from. I guess it's pretty bad when a nightmare feels like a privilege.

We approach the station for A-E. It's essentially a desk with a Black Suit behind it.

"Reassignment documents," he demands.

An Exclusion Guard at his side looks up and avoids making eye contact. Like everyone else. I wonder about their regulations: no eye contact with the Muslims.

My dad hands him the documents we were given at home. Home. It's disconcerting to even think about something happening there. Are the Suits ransacking it? Destroying things?

The Black Suit takes our cards from my dad and hands each one over a reader—the kind the TSA uses to scan a passport when you come back from a trip abroad. He hands them back to us. "Go inside. Report to Window T. Turn in your IDs. It will be on your right as you enter the building."

We shuffle inside Union Station along with nameless people. There are at least a hundred people in line at the windows, struggling to find a place to look that isn't a reminder of what our collective reality is. All of the people with bags in hand and a stunned look on their faces. Some break out, breaking the silence; then there's sobbing from one person and then another. The clacking of computer keys continues, but neither machine nor operator moved by tears. A couple



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