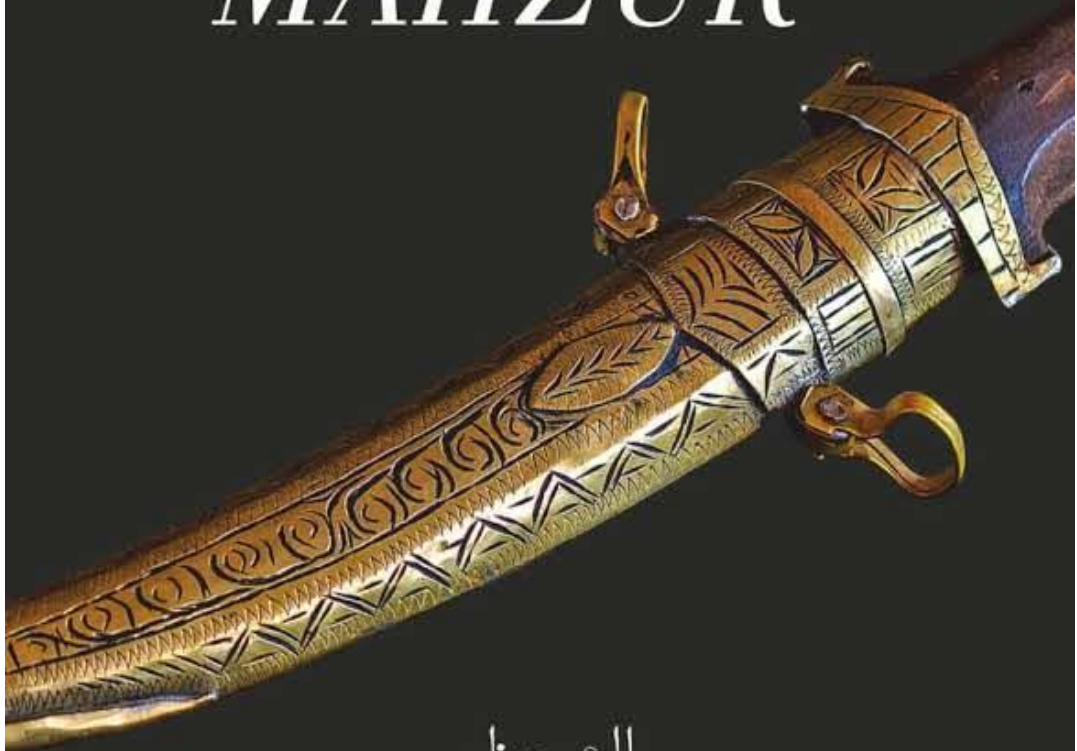


DR. HENANA BERJES

THE MAHZUR



المحظور

If it's forbidden, it will bleed...

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The Mahzur

DR. HENANA BERJES



Lieper Publication

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To the one unmatched in beauty and magnificence

*What is meant for you, will reach you even if it is beneath two mountains.
And what isn't meant for you, won't reach you even if it is between your two lips.*

(Arab Proverb)

At a point in time, we stumble upon a 'why' that we live for

At another point, we stumble upon a 'why' that we can die for

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Introduction

Between the vast expanses of *Himyar* and *Najd* reside the great tribes, the descendants of Shem, son of Noah (May peace prevail upon him) and as we turn the pages of history, we find them flourishing far beyond their designated borders. The *Rub al Khaali* or the Empty Quarter has since times immemorial divided the Arabian Peninsula into the North and the South and while the northern parts are mostly the Bedouins or tribal, the south is where most of the civilisations have prospered.

In the Northern parts, where the Bedouins have prospered for centuries, lies the Mighty Nafud desert, connected to the *Rub al Khali* by a comparatively narrow stretch of gravel plains and sand dunes, the *ad Dahna* or the corridor. The Nafud is not just another desert. It is a storehouse of historical treasures, a gateway into the undisclosed secrets of the past like the *Madain al Saleh*. It has a life of its own and the story that I am about to tell you unfolds at the fringes of the desert and then engulfs it whole.

The various settlers around the edges of the desert that have for centuries accepted the Nafud as an indispensable part of their lives, have let the desert to own them in return. These tribes have prospered after the oil boom of the 1950's and you will find the entire region teeming with technology but the mindset is still essentially Bedouin and that should mean ineradicable. They are people of the sword having evolved in the harshest climate found anywhere on earth and yet they have a heart of gold. Somehow, it is difficult not to fall in love with them for what they are; honest, sincere and much in love with their roots. The law that they believe in, is invisibly guided by tradition.

It is a land of culture shock for many westerners but that is exactly what makes it so appealing. Its infallible beauty lies in the obscurity that surrounds it. The Nafud is an enigma for most, a conundrum of things that otherwise seem so normal in other parts of the world.

I bring to you, *The Mahzur* or The Forbidden, a tale of love and loss, for where there is great love; the loss, invariably, is greater.

The harsh cry of a Saker Falcon overhead woke her up from slumber. She opened her eyes to see a magnificent gray and white bird in flight against the somber blue morning sky. A gentle mist had built up through the night and now it swam a notch above the sand dunes, leaving immense emptiness between the earth and the sky just like the vacuum that she had left behind. The desert sun had almost risen imparting a golden hue to the sands as far as the eye could see. She was still exhausted from yesterday's journey. She tried lifting her head to look around. Ahmed had fallen asleep at the place where he had been on watch, his one arm under his head for a pillow. Sarah gazed at his sun kissed cheeks, his bright black shoulder length hair falling on the dusky sand. His checkered red and white *Shemagh*¹ had come off during sleep. A lazy curl was playing on his forehead. It looked irresistible as the desert wind played through his hair. She felt like touching it, but a twinge of pain passed through the back of her neck as she tried to lift her head.

The great Nafud desert stretched for miles on all sides. There was no sign of civilization around them. They had no one for company.

She picked up the bottle of perfume that she had dropped in her sleep and held on tightly to her *abaya*² which flapped noisily on this blustery desert morning.

'Time to move on,' she thought.

She felt like waking up Ahmed but decided against it. He needed rest.

Her throat was parched from the cold windy night in the desert. She brushed off the sand from her clothes and threw the veil over her head, letting her long waist length dusky hair fall aimlessly all around her shoulders. She left the face bare without hindrance. There wasn't anyone around for miles. She moved towards the vehicle with difficult steps, sinking at many places in the soft desert sand. Thankfully, the car, a Land Cruiser, that was of a sandy brown hue that blended perfectly with the surrounding sand and made them almost inconspicuous, wasn't very far from where they had settled for the night.

She opened the rear window and pulled out a bottle of water from the carton lying under the back seat. They had to be careful with the water. She had no idea how long it could take them to cross the desert. From what she had ascertained, they were headed for Jordan however, she still had not talked to Ahmed about it though she was sure he had a plan. She took a few carefully measured sips, splashed some water on her face and then ascertaining the direction of the *qiblah*³ from the position of the sun; she turned towards the south and began her prayers.

A waft of tears floated in her eyes as she raised her hands towards the skies. She asked Allah to help them find a safe passage to Jordan as soon as possible without getting caught. She prayed for the safety of those they had left behind. Her back ached from the long and restless night in the desert and her heart ached even more.

She loved Ahmad with all her heart and had no reason to doubt his love for her. They were the survivors of a deadly

clan war, which they, inadvertently, had begun and of which they had absolutely no knowledge.

The sun was almost over the horizon when she finished her prayers. Ahmad was still asleep, his back turned towards her. She swallowed a tear. What if they were caught? In that, she couldn't imagine a worse fate for him. She feared more for his life than she feared for her. In just a few days he had been transformed into a fugitive, a runaway and the most wanted person of their region. Life would never be the same for them.

She was Sarah, the sober, beautiful and beloved daughter of a renowned Hotelier of the Al-Janubi clan and he was Ahmad, the indisputable champion in all off road desert rallies and the only son of one of the most reputed family of the As-Sehri's from the province of *Janub as Sehra* which is located at the southern end of the Nafud.

For as long as they could remember, the Nafud had been colored crimson by the unmatched rivalry between these two clans and each stayed at a distance further than the farthest root of a date palm tree. They tried not to cross paths and when they did, it would always be with suspicion, for none trusted the other.

It wasn't an unusual love story. It was like one of the many in its beginning that she had so often heard from her friends or maybe it was not..

Chapter 1

“*Hala*⁴, how are you doing?” inquired a vivacious voice at the other end of the phone that Sarah knew as that of her best friend, Malak.

“I’m good, though I was wondering that we haven’t caught up in quite some time,” she replied.

“Yeah, and that’s exactly the reason that I called you. It is little sister’s birthday bash and we are throwing a grand party at the *Istaraha*⁵,” Malak gushed.

“Who else is invited?” Sarah asked her

I have invited all our friends from the good old days and guess what; I out did the list that little sister had of her friends,” she chuckled.

“That is so like you.” smiled Sarah.

“I realized we wouldn’t be having another get together for years to come; I’ll be leaving for the UK and everyone else has plans as well.” She continued

“True”, Sarah sighed. “Time has really moved fast for us. Don’t you think so?”

They had been friends since school and had finished college together a month before. All her friends had plans for their future. Malak’s was to get married and settle down in the UK.

“Yeah, right, let’s catch up then. Be an early bird though.” Malak told her

“Sure thing, I’ll see you soon.” She hung up.

It is always a gender segregated get together in the province of *Janub as Sehra*⁶ and free mixing between men and women is prohibited by law but a party is fun nevertheless. You are free to do your kind of stuff.

“Don’t be late,” Sarah’s elder brother Hisham told her as he dropped her outside the high fenced corrugated iron gate of the *Istaraha*. Women weren’t allowed to drive as per the stringent rules of the province and that put an extra burden on the men of the family. It was their responsibility to drive the women of the house around or they could hire a taxi, but late night travels were solely the guardian’s domain.

Sarah nodded in the affirmative, pulling the heavy black veil a bit further over her already covered hair.

“I’ll call you when the party is over.” She said, stepping down from the gigantic maroon and silver GMC car.

“Little sister, I have to wake up early the next morning. Your brother has a job to attend to.” He smiled, patting her gloved hand.

Sarah smiled beneath the veil, a smile that would not be visible though.

She watched him back up the car and then he bade her enter the gate before he drove away.

She was used to such scrutiny so she didn’t notice it at all.

It really was a huge gathering. There were two female security guards at the gate who scanned her from head to toe before letting her inside. She removed her *abaya*, her head cover and gloves and handed them over to an attendant who then showed her a locker. All her belongings, including her cell phone, that had a camera, would be safely stowed away there till she stayed inside. You weren't allowed cameras to women's parties. It was prohibited lest someone would click a picture of women and show them to the men in their families. Women covered up their face in public.

Malak, a fair and sturdily built young woman, looked dazzling in a bright blue dress that reached up to her knees. She had paired it up with a cream pearl necklace and matching earrings.

"You look amazing;" Sarah almost yelled, trying to drown the voice of the blaring music

Malak hugged her.

"Hey girls, look who is here, the queen of the desert" and most of her friends turned around. It was a name that her friends had given her years ago and it was simply apt.

"Wow, don't you look gorgeous?" Rowdaina, her friend of eight years, gushed.

Girls in the province never shied from bestowing compliments on each other. It was considered the right thing to do, maybe because no men ever would.

"Look at you," chirped Rawaan, "you really know how to use that dusky complexion to your advantage"

Sarah smiled. She had chosen a sandy brown off shoulder gown that reached up to her toes. She was wearing small diamond studded circles in her ears and they imparted a strange shimmer to her dusky skin that resembled the setting sun at dusk. Sarah had ice streaks in her dark wavy hair that added to the mystery that surrounded her. She looked exquisite. She wasn't milk and rose complexioned like most girls in her friend circle or for that matter in her family. She had acquired her exquisite complexion from her grandmother who had a mulatto ancestry. She was a darker shade of cream with big brown eyes and thick long lashes. She was perfect in her own special way and maybe there was so much of the desert visible in her that her friends had given her this name, the desert queen.

Sarah returned the compliments with enthusiasm. Everyone had dressed elegantly for the occasion. They might not see each other again.

The food was amazing. Malak's sister, Zara cut the cake among loud cheers and music and then they started dancing.

Malak had an announcement to make but it was done discreetly. She had sneaked in a camera!

"Sarah, let me take your picture," she said.

"Malak, you will get us into some serious trouble." Sarah responded, always that prudent and careful girl that she was.

"No one is ever gonna find out. Oh, come on, for old times' sake, Sarah." Most of their closest friends had

joined them by now and everyone was excited about this adventure.

Malak had sneaked a small digital camera into the *Istaraha* somehow. The girls took turns to stand guard while the others snapped pictures and stood discussing, editing or deleting some of them. The adventure over, the camera was hidden inside a huge flower vase by the side of the door. Malak promised to mail them their pictures.

“I wanted this memory to last,” said Malak as they said their goodbyes.

They parted with tearful eyes. They had been close friends for years. All of them were going separate ways, and though they would be in touch, but college life was over.

Little did Sarah realize that a harmless adventure would turn her life away from the path that she had chosen for herself, that it would be the moment which would turn into the biggest ‘what if’ of her life, for it so happened that as Malak left for home that night, she forgot to take the camera with her and it was left there between the neatly arranged bunches of Juliet garden roses by the door waiting to be picked up by none other than Ahmed, the pampered son of the owner of the *Istaraha* who ran a chain of such entertainment houses all over the kingdom.

He was there by chance that day. His father had asked him to carry a detailed inspection of the place. On any other day he would have given a valid reason for refusing to do

so, but today he had agreed without qualms. Maybe he was destined to be there that day.

It was by mere coincidence that he accidentally tripped over the flower vase while chatting with a friend on his phone. The peach and pastel colored roses scattered in all directions revealing a small digicam that had apparently been hidden from prying eyes.

He hung up on his friend.

His first thought was about a spy cam.

‘Why would anyone want to do that?’

He locked the door and sat down on the couch. It was an ordinary camera. He switched it on. A low battery signal flashed and then it switched off. There was no way that he could charge the batteries there. He tucked the camera into the pocket of his low rise jeans and then he forgot about it.

It was quite late in the evening that she remembered the camera as he was about to lie down at night. It hurt his thigh as he turned around. He pulled out the camera and looked at it thoughtfully. Somebody had probably sneaked it into the *Istaraha* and if that was the case, it had to be a woman. This idea was enough to push him out of his bed. He searched for a charging lead. He remembered he had once owned a similar camera that lay unattended somewhere. He searched frantically for the charger among the stowed away trash. It was there, wrapped up among his used socks in the cabinet. A smile crossed his face.

It was one of those old style cameras that didn't work while charging. He turned on the TV and flipped through

the channels. Half an hour later he had the camera in his hand. He could feel the excitement. Women get-together sin *Janub as Sehra* were as alien to him as the planet Mars. He switched it on with a certain tremble in his hand. He wasn't a bad guy at heart. Should he be doing this, he thought. But he had to know.

The very first picture was that of a woman; No, a goddess would have been a more appropriate term. He found the face of a dusky hued goddess in equally dusky attire staring at him as if she had chosen to cast her spell upon him of all men alive on earth. Her curly brown tresses fell in waves over her sleek and bare shoulders up to her waist. He could feel dusk falling over him. Her smiling big brown eyes had a look akin to Aphrodite when she must have beguiled men into eating the golden apple. He was bewitched. He held on to the camera for dear life. A strange sensation crawled throughout his body, but it was not like anything that he had felt before.

No girl had ever had this effect on him. He had spent most of his youth abroad and he was the only son of a multi-millionaire. He had met girls, but he had never seen a goddess before.

“No wonder that they keep you all wrapped up and hidden. You could be the reason for a third world war.” He sighed, gazing at the picture with something akin to love rising within his chest. How could someone fall in love with a picture? He didn't even know who the girl in the picture was.

He knew he was cursed for he couldn't even reveal it to anyone. What would he tell them? He tried searching the camera for hints. There were group photos of girls, sometimes with the dusky girl and sometimes without her. He looked for the date and time. All of them had been clicked last night. That gave him some hope. He could find out who had arranged the party but looking for a girl that he couldn't even ask about seemed like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

He called up the manager of the *Istaraha*.

He picked up the phone at the first bell.

"Yes, sir," he replied in a sleepy voice intermingled with concern.

Ahmed never called any of his employees, but when he did it always meant bad news.

Strangely, he spoke in a gentle tone.

"Who hosted last night's party at the *Istaraha*?" he asked.

"It was a birthday party, Sir. Do you know the owner of the *Al-Hazraani* mall; it was his daughter's birthday party?"

"Oh, Okay." Ahmed answered

"Is everything alright, Sir?" The manager hoped that there had been no complaint.

"Let me know if someone inquires about some lost property. Let them get in touch with me." He said and hung up in order to avoid further questioning. He couldn't

risk that. His only hope was that the rightful owner would be frantically searching for the camera and in that case things might get hopeful. But what if no one came for the camera?

The daughter of the owner of the *Al-Hazraani* mall, Could she be his daughter? He wished she was, but his heart told him otherwise.

He couldn't sleep well that night. Dark brown eyes stared at him from all corners of his room that had turned into a desert at sunset. He kept looking at her picture till sleep overtook him in waves and then he dreamt about her.

Chapter 2

Malak had spent two sleepless nights thinking of a way to get back the camera. She just wished that no one had found it. Her friends would never trust her again and what if her Dad found out? She had been scared to call the *Istaraha* at first, but there was no way out other than going to that place and getting it back in case it was still there. Who knows, somebody might have changed the flowers for the next party. Oh, what would she do in that case? With her heart pounding, she called up the place and was about to hang up on the third bell when someone picked up the phone.

“*Allo*⁷,” she spoke.

“Yes,” A man answered.

“I forgot my wallet in one of the rooms last night. How can I have it back?”

“We have orders from the owner that you need to get in touch with him directly.”

Malak’s heart skipped a beat.

“Does he, does he have my wallet?”

“I think so. He was here on an inspection yesterday. Send a male guardian to pick it up. You can note down Mr. Ahmed’s number.”

Malak jotted down the number in some urgency.

“Thank you.” She hung up.

Ahmed, the rich and outgoing son of the multi-millionaire As-Sehri family was known for his eccentric ways. He had recently graduated from a European college and was here on a vacation. He would often be seen in the town square in his silver and black hummer sporting a goatee, drifting wildly in the streets with his equally noisy group of friends. He was a guy that no native girl wanted to be associated with for although he was extremely good looking, he was equally notorious for his heartbreaking tactics. He wasn't a guy that you could speak to easily.

Malak felt a pain rising in her stomach pit.

How on earth would she get in touch with him?

He had left a message. Did that mean he had the camera?

Late that night, Malak dialed the number with some consternation. Her little adventure was going a bit too far, but she had no choice.

“*Asalamualaikum*⁸,” it took every ounce of her strength to speak to him.

“*Hala*,” A deep and husky voice answered with a nonchalant attitude as if it was something extremely routine for him to receive calls from women at strange hours.

“It is about something that I forgot at the *Istaraha*,” she was almost on the verge of tears, “it’s my, my...”

“Your wallet, you mean” Ahmed completed her sentence

“Okay, can I have it back?” she asked anxiously. He seemed to be enjoying her discomfort.

He sensed the anxiety in her voice.

“Of course, you can have it back. But how do I return it to you? Maybe if you could send your driver..” he suggested.

“No, no, ” she couldn’t do that. She couldn’t send anyone to pick up that damned camera. She couldn’t risk letting out the little secret, if it actually was a secret anymore. She sincerely doubted it now. ‘A third adventure on top of the second,’ she thought.

“I, I really don’t know,” she whispered.

He wanted to meet her. Maybe she was the girl he was looking for or maybe she was a friend. She couldn’t be her. A goddess wouldn’t be deterred so easily. He thought

He was too well known throughout the province. He couldn’t meet her anywhere. In this place you didn’t need spy cameras. Peoples’ eyes scrutinized everything. It would mean trouble.

“I will find out a way,” he finally said “just give me a couple of days. I will call you back and don’t worry; your wallet is in safe hands.”

“Thank you,” he could hear her sigh in relief.

She hung up.

“That’s one step closer to you,” He smiled, gazing at the phone.

His sister Rania’s number flashed up on the screen. She studied in a college in Dubai, where she was being chaperoned by her Aunt. The As-Sehri family wasn’t a very conservative lot when it came to women’s education.

“*Hala*, big bro, please don’t tell me that you were talking to a girl again. Your line has been busy since the last fifteen minutes.” Rania and Ahmed had grown up together and though Ahmed was older than her by a year or so, the two siblings shared a very strong connection, maybe because that’s all they had, each other: They were a small but close knitted family.

“In fact I was,” He confessed. “I am in trouble, Rania and I want you to be here by the next flight.”

“I hope it isn’t something serious. What have you been up to this time?” Rania asked him in a concerned tone.

“Nothing, just come home, that’s it. Will you?”

“Fine,” she replied, always the loving sister that she was “but just drop a hint so that I don’t die thinking about it till tomorrow morning,” she said

“I think, I am in love,” he said in a low tone. “Now just get here by the next damned flight.” He hung up

He knew that Rania would come and she was the only person he could trust with anything. She was his sweet little partner in crime, as he called her affectionately. Rania had grown up in the province and she knew every girl that ever existed in the region. She had been the heart and soul of every girls’ gathering in *Janub as Sehra* during her college days. A lovely, happy, ambitious and socially active girl; that was Rania for you. She was a girl with a heart of gold.

It was another dense and sleepless night for Ahmed. The stars twinkled like her dazzling diamond earrings. She

reminded him of everything dusky. He was a fair and handsome guy with dark black hair that reached up to his shoulders. All the girls in his family were peach and rose complexioned. He had never seen a woman made up of burnished gold and one picture had ruined him forever.

Rania actually arrived the next evening amidst a lot of confusion about her arrival at this time of the year with exams just around the corner but was she a good actress? Oh, how she cried on seeing everyone. How homesick she had been under the pressure of the approaching exams. Mama almost choked on her tears when she saw her little daughter so anxious. She was ushered, with an obvious display of affection, into the living room where many of her Aunts had gathered, this being a weekend. Rania was the youngest and the brightest child of the family and she was loved by all.

It was well past bedtime when she finally got a chance to speak with him in private.

“Who is she, tell me?” she asked, locking the door from inside.

“I don’t know,” he replied, falling back on the couch. He looked so sad in that uncombed shabby hair that was usually so well kept. He hadn’t even shaved.

“Okay, I do not understand this. Did you actually call me all the way from Dubai to tell me that you are in love with someone you don’t even know about?” she asked in exasperation.

Ahmed hung his head in a sorrow so apparent that it hit her warm and loving heart like a sharp arrow.

“Brother, please tell me; what is it?” She had never seen him so lost. There had been countless girls, but he had never really been in love. He never said that he was. Something was seriously wrong and she needed to know what it was.

He pulled out a camera from his pocket and showed her the picture.

“Do you know her?” he asked hopefully.

Rania suddenly found herself looking at a face that she would never have expected to see under such circumstances. If a bomb would have dropped right overhead, shattering the whole ceiling in one instant, Rania wouldn't have been as shocked as she was right now.

She clutched at the little camera with disbelief and slumped into the couch right next to her brother as if all energy had been drained out of her body.

“Why of all the beautiful girls on the entire planet,” she sighed, “Oh, brother, you had to fall in love with a girl of the enemy clan, the clan of the Al-Janubi's?”

Ahmed didn't have to be told the meaning of the sentence that he had just heard. It was a name that was never mentioned in the As-Sehri household except with disdain and Ahmed had been a part of such conversations but suddenly it felt so useless. She could very well have been the daughter of the ape king from the planet of the apes. It

suddenly ceased to make a difference. Rania saw the look of indifference on his face.

“Sarah is not the kind of girl you think she is,” she said, “she is very determined and strong willed and she will never go against her family for someone from...” she stopped short. “Wait a minute, where did you get her picture from?” She picked up the camera and surfed through the other pictures.

“Sarah, Oh, what a beautiful name!” thought Ahmed “Sarah,” he breathed and the entire room turned gold.

“So she was at Malak’s party.” Rania said. “I heard about it from my friends last night. Sarah is leaving for Australia with her brother next month.”

“I must meet her before that.” Ahmed looked at his sister with eagerness.

“Don’t expect me to help you in this foolishness. You have to get over this feeling, brother. There is no way that Sarah will ever think about you in such light. This is next to impossible.”

“I trust you to find a way, Rania, please”

“Brother why don’t you understand? Sarah is engaged.”

Ahmed looked at her with disbelief and then he laughed. He laughed so loudly that the windows shook.

“It had to be this way and now I am so sure of this feeling. It has to be love for as they say that the course of true love never runs smooth. If I am headed for damage, my dear

Rania, so be it. This is one curse that I have to live with or die trying...”

Rania looked at him with utter skepticism;

“I don’t think you are in your senses,” she finally said. “Why do I have this strange feeling that you are knocking at a door that leads to devastation?”

“Oh, come on, Rania, don’t be so cynical.”

“I am sorry, brother. Spare me this horror.” Rania left the room in anguish. She didn’t even look behind.

Ahmed could understand her concern. He smiled.

“With or without your help, little sister; I will find a way. Trust me, I will find a way.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He would call Malak, he thought, but he needed a plan.

Chapter 11

It was the moment after the Friday prayers and people had collected in the town square where all public executions took place. This time it was a foreign national who had been charged with rape and murder of a sixteen year old girl. There was much uproar in the crowd. It was a heinous crime and he deserved the punishment. The men dressed in white *thobes*²⁶ and *gutras*¹ surrounded the prisoner who

would be beheaded in front of their eyes. He had a black hood over his face. His body was trembling at the thought of the impending doom. His hands were tied behind his back. The executioner had not arrived. Policemen in mustard and black uniforms kept the crowd from getting too close to the prisoner. Emotions ran high among the crowd made up of men from both clans. They had no difference of opinion in this matter. He had to be executed.

“Such people should be wiped out from the face of the earth, ” said one man standing near to the execution post. He was As-Sehri.

“It is easier to pass judgment when it is not a man from your clan” retorted the man standing next to him. He was Al-Janubi.

“What do you mean? Why are you being so sarcastic?” he asked. Apparently he was high on patience.

“We will see when they discuss the case of Abdu Mohsen in the court. Let us see how prejudiced you are then.”

“It isn’t the same thing,” he replied. “Allah knows, it was an accident”

“He was drunk” another man had joined the conversation that had started to heat up now.

“The police found high levels of alcohol in his blood. That makes him a murderer.” Another man added.

“It was an accident.” The man still seemed to be holding on to patience. Apparently he had no defense, but a man, another As-Sehri, had lost his patience.

“Who authorized you to discuss the matter out of court? You are none of his kin to thrust your opinion on others.” he shouted.

“This is an open and shut case. Everyone knows the verdict. He was drunk, he killed a man. It was a homicide. Your clan can sit and rejoice in this opinion for now and wait until the next beheading takes place and I swear by our clan that it will be Ahmed’s. He killed an innocent person.”

“I will pull out your tongue if you dare to utter one more word against him.” It was a group of young men, the same age as Ahmed. Probably his friends

“Hooligans, that’s what all you As-Sehri’s are! You are promoting evil in the society.”

At this the group of young men pounced on the man who had said this. They pushed him to the ground. More people added to the confusion each defending his own clan. There was uproar among the mob with cries of *Allah o Akbar* rising high in the air. Police had to fire in the air to scatter the mob. The dark and lean body of the prisoner trembled even more under this added confusion.

The beheading took place in silence. A head separated from the body rested with a thud on the hard ground. The hood fell off. Vacant eyes stared out of their sockets into

nothingness. ‘*Allah o Akbar*²⁷’ the crowd echoed. An innocent sixteen year old had been avenged.

The group of men that had been a part of this fight tidied up their *thobes* and walked towards a sandy brown Land Cruiser. The driver took up the seat and turned the car towards the hospital.

Rayed was already there when they reached. He was waiting for them at the gate.

“What happened?” he asked them.

“We had an altercation at the execution grounds” said Nasser. He was a close friend of Rayed.

“They have decided upon the verdict” added Omar

“It can’t be. The matter is still not in court” Rayed pondered, “and besides the family might agree on the *Diyah*”

“*Diyah* is out of the question. There is so much pressure on them. People have been visiting them ever since and all they are speaking about is revenge. They will have nothing less than *Qisas*” added Yehya. He was the son of a reputed lawyer. “And even if they do, the verdict will still be the same. 200,000 bucks for being under the influence of alcohol, add to that the road traffic accident that killed a man. Ahmed is doomed. I heard my father discussing about it yesterday.”

“We can’t let it happen” Rayed seemed visibly worried.

“We can’t do anything” It was Omar.

“Legally that is,” added Yehya

“What do you mean?” the men asked in unison.

“He will have to escape. That is the only way out.”

“The case is not in the court of law as yet. What if we wait?” Naser asked

“This unfortunate incident is going to be one more cornerstone of the ongoing rivalry. The entire region is glued to newspapers and television waiting for a verdict in this case. The nation is boiling, guys. There is no chance that Ahmed can be helped in this case. It is being discussed in the mosques, on primetime and on the evening news. How do you think we can influence anyone in this matter? He is under police surveillance for 24 hours a day. Yesterday they took away his phone as well. They are already treating him like a criminal. We can’t wait.”

“Ahmed will be jailed after his discharge from the hospital and there is no way that we can help him in escaping after that. If we do have a chance it is now or never. We have to act fast”

“You are right.” Rayed admitted.

“How much time do we have?” Yehya asked.

“He might be discharged in a couple of days at the most. He is still recovering from that gash on his chest. He needs sedatives to sleep at night otherwise the pain keeps him awake.”

“Make it worse,” added Omar. “We need time. Let him deteriorate. We can’t do a thing in two days.”

“What can we do?” asked Yehya in a perplexed tone

“Figure out something till we come up with an escape plan.” he replied

“His room is guarded by the police.” Rayed added. “We have to be careful. We have to be very careful.”

Chapter 14

“Sarah, don’t you think that the corset is a bit too tight for your comfort.” Her mother was checking her wedding gown at the dress maker’s. “I think the hemline should be floor length instead of ankle length. You will be wearing heels that day.”

“She seems to have put on some weight. I designed the dress according to her measurements last month, but we can take care of that, no issues.” The dressmaker replied.

“It looks fine.” Sarah added.

“I don’t think that you can breathe in a dress that is so tight around the bodice,” said her mother.

“We will loosen it up a bit ma’am, don’t worry. She will look perfect.”

“She is my only daughter.” Her mother beamed. “And she deserves the best.”

The dressmaker helped her out of the dress. Sarah felt relieved.

“Where is your engagement ring, Sarah?” Her mother noticed its absence as Sarah unzipped the back of her dress.

She blushed at the question.

“I think I forgot to wear it in the morning.” She lied.

“You shouldn’t, *ya bint*³⁴,” she said.

She didn’t reply. She didn’t have an answer.

“Can you please hurry? We have an appointment at the coiffeur,” she told Sarah who was leisurely changing into her *Abaya*.

“Haven’t we already have been there thrice?” Sarah asked while adjusting her *Niqaab* as they walked down the stairs.

“Your Coiffeur called me last night. She told me that she had a new hairdo in mind. Why don’t we just get an idea? Sarah, how can you be so aloof regarding your wedding preparations? I have to literally drag you everywhere. Allah knows there is so much still left to be done. I have to visit the interior decorator, the florist and the caterer. No doubt your brothers are doing everything but even then things have to be finalized. Hassan is waiting for me at the old *Souq*.” she sighed in exasperation. They were in the main street.

“I will go alone. You don’t need to bother,” she replied.

“I simply don’t understand why your friends have disappeared into thin air all of a sudden. They would have been such a great help and what about Malak; she had been a huge help during your engagement days.” Her mother said. “Or maybe you could go along with your cousins.”

“I said I can manage alone.” Sarah told her. “Don’t worry, I will be fine.”

“Let me know your final decision regarding the *coiffure*.” She said, hiring a cab. “Get in, I will drop you there.”

Sarah reluctantly got into the cab, her mind still not realizing the enormity of the tragedy that had occurred.

Her phone rang at as she sat down next to her mother in the cab.

“Ma’am, I am calling from the *Al Nash’i* Bank. There is an initiative that has been launched under the young women Entrepreneur scheme and our bank has chosen a few young and dynamic women from affluent families to help the bank in making this dream come true.” A girl with a beautiful and clear voice was speaking to her in fluent Arabic.

This was the last thing that she wanted to hear today.

“So, what do you want me to do?” she asked with some exasperation that was so unlike her.

“Could you please drop by our bank today by four pm so that we could introduce you to the other members?”

“I am sorry, but I can’t do that today,” she answered, “Maybe some other time.”

“I can understand, ma’am, and I am extremely sorry for not informing you earlier, but if you could just spare a few minutes of your time, it would be an honor.” She sounded apologetic and professional at the same time.

“I would have been glad but I have an appointment at a place diametrically opposite to the bank if you understand and there’s no way that I can be at the bank within such a short time.”

“We could wait for you till five pm ma’am.” She said.

“It won’t be possible, dear.” She tried to sound cheerful. “I am at *Bait al Khali* right now. I hope you can understand.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience ma’am.” She dropped the phone.

‘Weird,’ thought Sarah.

“Who was it?” her mother asked.

“Someone from the bank,” Sarah replied. “They want me to talk to young women entrepreneurs.”

“I think you should. It’s a good initiative.”

“Yes,” Sarah replied.

“Mama, I want to ask you something.” she said after a while.

“Yes, darling, what is it?” Her mother asked, looking at her daughter who would soon be married and gone.

“I was wondering, how would it help Rowdaina’s family if they chose *Qisas* over *Diyah*? Shouldn’t financial security be their preference?”

Her mother looked at her keenly.

“I should have guessed. So that’s why you are so aloof these days.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, not looking at her mother. Thankfully she was wearing a *Niqaab*.

“You are such a sensitive little darling. I can understand your concern for Rowdaina and her family and this is what everyone is talking about right now. You are right but let me tell you something. We talked about it that day, at Abdu Mohsen’s house and his wife had just one sentence. She said “I watched him dying before my own eyes for no fault of his, No compensation is enough for the damage that has been done. Blood alone can cool down the fire that is in our hearts.” She doesn’t talk much nor do Abdu Mohsen’s sisters but they have the same opinion. Ahmed must die. I remember her reciting the verse,

‘If ye avenge not him, the son of the best of you,

Then fling, fling the sword away and naught but the spindle ply’”

(Farazdaq)

A pang hit her across the chest. It was the famous verse that a poet had uttered upon hearing about the tragic events at *Karbala*³⁵. What if he actually was beheaded? Wasn’t she the reason of his ruin? How could she ever

walk this earth knowing that innocent blood had been shed? Wasn't she the invisible reason for this misdeed that he had committed? She felt like crying, but tears hung there among her brown lashes, trying hard to find a way to erupt unnoticed. They couldn't.

Dear Reader, this excerpt was just for you. I hope you liked it. In case you would like to read further, the book is just a click away. Thank you

'It isn't enticing enough if it isn't forbidden.' Humanity has sworn by this dictum since eons. Aren't we here as a testimony to the first sin ever committed by Man? How can Sin be sacred? How can anything related to life remotely be connected to sanctity and yet we swear by Sanctity as well. For years, the conflict is manifest and for years, unresolved. Somewhere between the promise of resurrection and eternal damnation, we exist as a race tugged towards both good and bad by a thin thread of belief. Satan in one minute and angel in another, we defy all logic when it comes to tasting the forbidden fruit. What is so tantalizing about it is the same thing that makes it unforgiving, its soul! And in the end it hurts, it leads to bloodshed, it kills and it destroys. It leaves us vulnerable to damage and then the perdition never ends. 'The Mahzur,' reminds you of a simple fact, If it is forbidden, It will Bleed..

The Al Nafud is not just another desert. It is an amalgamation of poetry and music in the right proportions but it has a heart of stone under that soft burnished gold skin. The sand dunes sing to your call as if a dozen tubas are blown in unison but it isn't a song for the faint of heart. It is unforgiving.

Sarah, the lovely daughter of the Al Janubis is engaged to be married to another man but this doesn't deter Ahmed from falling for a woman whose clan he has abhorred all his life. And when kismet trudges them towards an unlikely path through its bosom, does the Nafud forgive them for this mistake or does it unleash a fury unheard of in Janub as Sehra, their native land?

I bring to you a love story from the wildest and the most beautiful desert of the Middle East. It is a story of love and loss for where there is great love, the loss, invariably is greater.

Dr. Henana Berjes is an MD in Anaesthesiology and Critical care and has worked and travelled through the Middle East. She writes about relationships and the blank spaces between them.

Mom, Doctor, Author, Blogger, Vlogger

Connect with her on: www.henanaberjes.com



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