

YUSUF'S DOOR

A NOVEL



Madarej 

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A work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely
coincidental.

Dedication

*To those who open a door for others
without leaving their own homes unprotected;
to those who know that kindness does not
surrender a right,
and gentleness is not defeat.*

Chapter One

Ash at the Threshold

On the night Yusuf's shop burned down, the first person to call him was the man who had threatened him before noon.

Rayed al-Kilani did not say hello. He spoke over a wash of distant noise:

—Your shop is on fire.

Yusuf rose from the edge of the bed and kept the phone to his ear for a moment, as though he had not understood the two words.

—Who told you?

—I'm at the end of the street. Call Civil Defense if they haven't arrived yet.

Then the line went dead.

The light in the living room was on. Hind looked up from her laptop and saw her father pulling his thobe over his pajama shirt and searching for his keys in the wooden dish beside the door.

—What happened?

He opened the door.

—The workshop.

Maryam came down the hall, fastening her headscarf with one hand.

—We're coming with you.

—Stay here until I know what's there.

He did not wait for them to object. He hurried down the stairs, then climbed back up three steps because he had left his phone on the table. When he went out again, Hind was behind him.

—I told you to stay.

—And I heard you.

There was no room in his voice for another argument. He motioned for her to get in and drove through neighborhood streets he knew in the dark as well as he knew the positions of the nails on his workbench.

Hind called emergency services. They told her the report had been received and the crews were on their way. Yusuf called Abu Tariq; the phone rang until the call dropped. He called Sami, but there was no answer. The second time, a recording told him the phone was unavailable. At the first traffic light, he raised the phone and tried a third time.

Hind said:

—Watch the road, Dad.

He put the phone back and slowed down. Reaching the scene before the ambulance would help no one, but he needed to hear that from someone else.

The smoke appeared before the building did. It rose from the low roof in a black mass that thinned above the houses, while the fire engines cast red flashes across the old walls. Security officers had sealed off the mouth of the alley, so Yusuf stopped in the middle of the road and got out before turning off the engine.

One of them called after him, but he either did not hear or pretended not to. He kept going until a firefighter caught him by the arm.

—Don't go in, uncle.

—There's a rear passage inside. Its door opens onto the courtyard, and the stairs to the apartments are through there.

—Is anyone still inside?

Yusuf looked at the faces gathered behind the tape. Umm Salman was clutching her little boy, the grocer was propping his wife against the wall, and Salim the barber stood barefoot. Abu Tariq was nowhere in sight.

—The owner of the watch shop. He said he was working tonight. His is the second shop on the right.

The firefighter asked no more questions. He spoke into his radio, and two firefighters entered through the passage. Yusuf stood where the man had left him, his hand held slightly away from his side, as though his arm were still in the firefighter's grip.

Hind reached him. Her phone was in her hand, the camera open, but when she saw Umm Salman, she turned off the screen.

—I called Mom. She's coming with Uncle.

—There's no need for her to come.

She looked at him without answering. The flames had reached the wooden sign above the workshop, the one he had painted by hand fifteen years earlier: "Yusuf's Workshop for Doors and Locks." The Arabic letter fā' fell first, then one end of the sign sagged until the name hung crooked over the fire.

The paramedics brought Abu Tariq out after a few minutes that felt longer than the whole alley. He was conscious, but the oxygen mask covered half his face. He tried to raise a hand when he saw Yusuf; it rose only a little.

Yusuf walked alongside the stretcher.

—I'm here, Abu Tariq.

The man moved his fingers, and then they put him into the ambulance. Yusuf tried to climb in after him, but the paramedic closed the door and said Abu Tariq's son had called and was on his way.

When the ambulance pulled away, Yusuf found Nabil standing behind him. He had thrown a light coat over a rumpled thobe, and his face bore the traces of unfinished sleep.

—Where did the fire start?

—I don't know.

—The records room?

Yusuf turned to him slowly.

—Abu Tariq came out alive.

Nabil lowered his eyes.

—Thank God. I'm only asking because... all the contracts are in there.

—And all the people are out here.

Nabil said nothing. He took two steps toward the tape, then came back when one of the security officers shouted at the crowd to move away. At the far end of the alley, Yusuf caught

sight of Rayed al-Kilani. He was not dressed for bed, but in a white shirt and a light jacket, as though he had come from a meeting rather than his home. He was speaking on the phone and looking up at the roof.

Yusuf headed toward him. Hind stepped into his path without meaning to, and he went around her.

—You said you were at the end of the street.

Rayed ended his call.

—I was passing along the main road. I saw the smoke.

—You happened to pass by here at this hour?

—I don't have to justify the roads I take.

Nabil came closer before Yusuf could answer.

—Not now.

Rayed slipped the phone into his pocket, then gave the building a long look.

—I told you both this place could not bear any more delay.

Yusuf did not raise his voice.

—And I told you a threat does not become advice merely because it is spoken calmly.

Nabil tightened his grip on his brother's forearm.

—Yusuf, not now.

This time, Yusuf stepped back. Rayed went to his car and stayed until the flames had died down, then left without saying goodbye to anyone.

Near dawn, the smoke thinned, and the firefighters managed to clear a narrow path in front of the workshop. No one was allowed inside, but from behind the tape Yusuf could see the workshop's back door. One leaf stood open, and the metal collar around the lock was intact.

He asked the officer who emerged carrying a clear plastic bag:

—Was the door forced?

—It doesn't look that way. We'll know after the inspection.

Inside the bag was a black key with a blue plastic tag hanging from it, half melted. Yusuf leaned forward slightly and recognized the marks he had cut into it years ago: the letter B and the number two.

The officer said:

—Who does this belong to?

Yusuf did not answer at once. There were three copies of the key to the workshop's rear door, which also opened the office: one in his pocket, one with Nabil, and the third he had given Sami when he allowed him to close the workshop alone. The shared side entrance had another key, and a brown leather tab hung from Nabil's copy.

He took out his key and laid it in the officer's palm.

—This is mine.

Nabil searched his pockets, then held up his key as well.

The officer looked from one man to the other.

—And the third?

Yusuf looked up at the blackened window above the workshop. Since Rayed's call, he had phoned Sami four times. Each time the phone had rung until the call dropped.

He said:

—The boy who works for me has it.

Behind them came the baker's voice, hesitant, as though he feared opening yet another door to the fire:

—Abu Hind... my camera overlooks the side entrance.

. . .

Chapter Two

Twelve Days Before the Fire

Yusuf raised the workshop shutter at ten minutes to seven, before the bakeries opened and before the neighborhood parking spaces filled. The shutter did not need all that effort, but it groaned halfway up, so Yusuf would set his shoulder beneath it until it settled overhead, then say every morning that he would replace its spring before the end of the week.

He never did.

That morning, Umm Salman was waiting for him at the curb, holding the broken latch bolt from a lock.

—The apartment door won't stay shut. I put a chair behind it last night.

Yusuf lowered the shutter to half height and took the piece from her.

—Where's Salman?

—At work. I told him not to lose a day over a lock.

—You were right. I'll stop by after I open up.

—And how much will it cost?

He looked at the broken piece, then at the bag of bread in her other hand.

—Let me see the lock first.

She knew that phrase.

—Don't say "let me see," then forget to charge me.

—And you won't let me forget.

She smiled and walked away. Yusuf raised the shutter the rest of the way. A few minutes later, Sami appeared at the far end of the street, his hair wet as though he had washed his face and head in a hurry, a bakery bag in his hand.

Yusuf went to her apartment before noon. The entire lock was not damaged; only the latch bolt had broken, and replacing it cost less than half what she had feared she would have to pay. She took out two banknotes for him. He accepted one and wrote the balance in a small ledger.

—I told you I'd pay you in full.

—And this is payment in full. Half today, the other half at the end of the month.

—Salman doesn't know you let me pay in installments.

—He'll know from the receipt. I don't want you to keep a secret; I want that chair gone from behind the door tonight.

He left her a copy of the account and tested the lock in front of her three times before returning to the workshop. He found Sami at his bench, the bakery bag beside him.

—What time is it?

—I was here at six thirty, then I went to get breakfast.

Yusuf took the bag from him and turned over the receipt stapled to it. The payment time was printed beneath the total.

—You paid at five past seven, and the bakery is two minutes away.

Sami looked at the receipt, then at the floor.

—I was ten minutes late.

—Say that from the beginning. Start by fixing the lateness; don't add a lie to it.

He did not wait for an apology. He handed Sami the work list and pointed to a wooden door propped against the wall.

—Sand the bottom edge only. The customer doesn't want a new color.

Sami did not argue, nor did he apologize again. He carried the door to his bench and began working on the edge Yusuf had indicated.

Abu Tariq came in after eight carrying a wall clock wrapped in a towel.

—I repaired it for its owner, and now I can't lock the display case. One craft breeds another.

Yusuf inspected the case key.

—The tooth is bent. I'll come by this afternoon.

—Your afternoon or everyone else's?

Sami laughed. Yusuf said:

—Before you close.

—Then write it down. Your memory is a door with no latch.

Yusuf wrote Abu Tariq's name on the whiteboard. Seven names were listed beneath it, each with a deadline that had passed or was about to. He stood studying them for a moment, then drew a red circle beside Umm Salman's name.

Hind arrived at ten with a small envelope in her hand. She stood in the doorway waiting for him to notice her, but he was measuring a metal frame for a man from the other side of the

neighborhood. She raised the envelope over her head. He smiled and gestured toward the chair.

She waited until the man had left.

—I don't want the customer's chair. I want you home at six.

—Is everything all right?

—If you come, you'll find out.

He held out his hand for the envelope. She pulled it to her chest.

—At six.

—I'll be there.

—You said that the day I presented my project, and you walked in after everything was over.

He set the measuring tape on the table.

—This time, I'll be home before dinner.

She looked at the crowded board behind him.

—Then erase a name.

—I'll erase them all.

She was not convinced, but she handed him the envelope. It bore the logo of a media company in another city. He opened it and found a job offer addressed to her. He read the salary and starting date, then looked up at her.

—Congratulations, Hind.

She seemed less happy than he had expected.

—Mom knows. We want to talk about moving and where I'll live. Don't say now that we'll work it out. Come home and sit with us.

—At six.

She placed a finger on the paper.

—No later than seven.

She left, and the envelope remained on the workbench. Yusuf set a box of nails on top of it so the ceiling fan would not blow it away.

Shortly before noon, a man Yusuf had never seen entered wearing work clothes too clean for a workshop. He did not introduce himself. He studied the storefront, the ceiling, and the passage, then asked Sami:

—Does Mr. Yusuf own the whole building?

Yusuf answered from behind him:

—I own half. What do you want?

The man took out a business card and placed it on the table. “Al-Rawafid Development—Acquisitions Department.”

—Mr. Rayed al-Kilani would like to meet with you and your brother.

—About what?

—Purchasing the property.

—Does my brother know?

—He gave us your number.

The man left a thin folder behind, then departed. Yusuf did not open it until he had finished Umm Salman's lock and the door for the man with the metal frame. Abu Tariq's display case remained on the board until the end of the day. When Yusuf sat down with the folder after the afternoon prayer, he found a figure that made him read the first page twice.

It was far higher than his own estimate of the building's value, but the final line was clearer than the figure:

This offer is conditional upon delivery of the property vacant of all occupants within thirty days.

He called Nabil. There was no answer. He sent him a picture of the line, then closed the folder and put it in the contract drawer.

At five fifty-five, a boy came to tell him that his mother had gone up to the roof and the apartment door had locked behind her, leaving his little sister alone inside. Yusuf took his lock kit and went with him. The building stood at the

other end of the neighborhood, and the old lock had to be taken apart rather than forced. By the time he opened the door, it was six forty-six.

There were three missed calls from Hind on his phone and one message:

No need to rush. We're done.

He returned home after eight. The platter of rice still sat in the middle of the table, its edges gone dry. Maryam was in the kitchen, and Hind was in her room behind a closed door.

—Did the door open? Maryam asked.

—Yes. There was a little girl alone in the apartment.

—I know. Her mother called to thank you.

He waited for the rest of the sentence.

Maryam said:

—Hind doesn't want to stop you from opening a door for a child. She only wanted not to learn from a message that you weren't coming.

Yusuf sat down at the table without reaching for the food.

His phone chimed. It was a message from Nabil:

*I'm on my way. Don't turn down the offer
before you hear me out.*

. . .

Chapter Three

Half the House

Nabil entered the al-Sur neighborhood after midnight and had to slow at the bend, where a delivery van, two bicycles, and a chair someone had left outside the barber shop narrowed the road. Nothing has changed, he told himself. Then he saw a new glass storefront where Abu Arif's fabric shop had once stood and realized that the only thing unchanged was the disorder.

His briefcase was on the passenger seat. Whenever the car stopped at a light, he rested a hand on it—not to keep it from falling, but as though his touch could stop the figures inside from climbing higher.

Three overdue salaries. Two invoices from the iron supplier. A house payment due in seventeen days. And a former partner who no longer replied except with messages containing the word “court.”

Nabil had sold his large car a month earlier and told everyone he was tired of the fuel costs. The small car he was driving was rented, and the sharp scent of its air freshener did not smell like

him. He had not told his wife that the company account held enough for only one more week. He had told Yusuf nothing until Rayed al-Kilani came to him with a figure too large for a drowning man to pretend he had not seen the rope.

The light was on in his brother's house. Maryam opened the door and greeted him without asking a question. He found Yusuf alone in the living room, the offer folder open beside him.

—Where's Hind?

—Asleep.

From the brevity of the answer, Nabil knew something had happened before he arrived, but he did not ask. He took off his coat and set his briefcase on the floor.

—Did you read the figure?

—I read the condition.

—And the figure?

—It doesn't buy away people's rights in a month.

Nabil sat opposite him.

—The people pay rent. We're not throwing them into the street tonight. The company will compensate anyone with a lease.

—And what about anyone whose lease isn't clear? What about the tenants we renewed by word of mouth because you were traveling and I kept saying the paperwork could wait until tomorrow?

—That was your mistake, not mine.

The sentence struck where Nabil could see the wound in his brother's face. He took no pleasure in it, but he did not retreat.

—We own the property in equal halves, Yusuf. Ever since Father died, you've acted as if staying here made all of it yours.

—And I transfer your share to you every month.

—My share of the rent, not my share of the decision.

Nabil opened his briefcase and took out one statement after another. He laid them before his brother, ordered by due date.

—Look. I'm not asking to sell so I can buy a farm. These men worked for me. If I don't pay their wages, I'm stealing the days they gave me.

This is the house payment. This is what I owe the supplier. I sold the car and paid off part of it, and I have nothing left to sell but my share here.

Yusuf picked up the first sheet. He read the worker's name and the amount, then moved on to the second.

—Why didn't you tell me before?

Nabil gave a short laugh.

—Because you'd do exactly what you're doing now. You'd stare at every name until its owner became one of your neighbors, then say, "Give me time."

—How much does the offer give you beyond what you need?

—What lies beyond it is none of your business, just as where you spend the workshop's profits is none of mine.

—It is my business if the price is four families and the owners of three shops forced out in thirty days.

Nabil leaned forward.

—And me? Is there no place for me on that list?

Yusuf fell silent, his mouth tightening in the way Nabil had known since they were boys.

Nabil imagined he could hear the objections his brother did not voice: that he had expanded his business on debt, that he had been warned about his partner, that the house whose payment frightened him was larger than he needed. The answers were ready, but he watched Yusuf set them aside and leave them unspoken.

Yusuf said:

—You'll have your full right. Give me time to determine what they are owed, and we'll ask for another appraisal.

—Al-Rawafid's offer expires in twenty-one days.

—And the man wants a vacant property within thirty. That alone makes me ask why he's paying so much.

—Because he's assembling the adjoining plots. The project is larger than our building.

—Then he won't disappear in a week.

—He may buy from someone else and build around us. Then I'll be left with a share no one wants.

Yusuf closed the folder.

—Tomorrow we'll visit the tenants, review the leases, and then sit down with him.

—You want to ask their permission to sell our property.

—I want to know what we owe before we promise what we don't own.

Maryam came in carrying a pot of tea. She set down two cups and left without sitting. Nabil's gaze followed her, then he lowered his voice.

—Did you tell her how much you paid out of your own pocket for the tenants who fell behind?

Yusuf looked up.

—That isn't what we're discussing.

—It's the very same thing. You think what you hide from your own home becomes an act of goodness simply because you paid it to another.

Yusuf stood.

—We'll finish in the morning.

Nabil knew the conversation was over, just as it had been whenever their father feared he might say something he would regret. He gathered his papers and put them in the briefcase, but left the copy of the offer on the table.

In the morning, the brothers walked through the property together. Umm Salman was hanging her children's clothes in the courtyard, Abu Tariq

was opening his shop, and Sami was pushing the weary shutter up with his shoulder. Each of them paused to greet Yusuf or ask him about a job, while Nabil walked beside him like a guest the place knew but the people did not.

In the upstairs apartment, Umm Ziyad brought out receipts held together with a rubber band. Her last written lease was eight years old; everything after it consisted of receipts in Yusuf's handwriting. Nabil flipped through them.

—This isn't enough reason to refuse a sale.

Yusuf handed the papers back to her.

—But it's enough reason not to sign until we've asked someone who knows.

At noon, they sat with Rayed in a glass-walled office overlooking models of white towers. He explained the project, the new road, and the parking facilities, then slid across the table a form authorizing a technical team to inspect the building.

—The inspection doesn't bind you to the sale, Rayed said. It only saves us time if we reach an agreement.

Yusuf read the form but did not sign it.

Nabil put it in his briefcase.

When they came out, Yusuf said:

—No one enters until we know who they are and what they'll do.

—It's an inspection form, not a sale contract.

—Then there's no harm in waiting.

Nabil stopped beside his car.

—Every delay is easy for you because no creditor is knocking on your door.

He drove away before Yusuf could answer. At the first gas station, he pulled over, took out the inspection form, and signed at the bottom. He photographed it with his phone and sent it to Rayed.

The reply came in less than a minute:

Excellent. The team will enter without disrupting anyone.

Nabil kept staring at the last phrase. He wanted to ask what “without disrupting anyone” meant, but then a new notification appeared at the top of the screen: one of his workers asking about his salary.

He closed the conversation and set the phone facedown.

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Chapter Four

The Second Key

On Thursday morning, Yusuf took a new key from the drawer and wrote the letter B and the number two on its blue plastic tag. The number referred to the door, not the number of copies: one key was his, another had been with Nabil since the days when they took turns collecting the rent, and this third one would remain with Sami.

The decision had not been born that morning alone. Over the previous three weeks, Sami had arrived early more often than not, returned every last dirham of change from workshop purchases, and asked to learn how to install precision locks instead of merely carrying doors. And when Yusuf was gone for two hours to take Maryam to an appointment, he returned to find the cashbox in its place and the orders completed.

He called to him from the far end of the workshop.

—Leave the door you're working on and come here.

Sami brushed the sawdust from his forearms and came over. Yusuf placed the key in his palm.

—It opens the back entrance and the office. The front shutter has a different key.

Sami turned it between his fingers.

—I'll open up on my own?

—I have an appointment tomorrow, and I may be late. Open at seven. No one goes into the office.

He took him into the passage and had him test the lock. Sami inserted the key upside down the first time, then turned it over and worked the metal bolt. He opened the door, closed it, and tugged it to make sure it held.

Yusuf said:

—Don't give it to anyone, and don't make a copy. If you lose it, call me before you even start looking for it.

—Understood.

The sound of the sanding machine came from inside. It was running empty; Sami had left its switch in the on position. He rushed over, unplugged it, then stood beside it and waited.

Yusuf placed a hand on its casing. The motor had not grown hot.

—When you walk away from it, pull the plug.

—I forgot for one minute.

—One minute is enough to ruin a machine—or a hand.

He did not take back the key. He returned to the large table, where the apartment locks had accumulated, each tied to a small slip bearing its owner's name and phone number. Sami remained beside the machine for a moment, then slipped the key onto his ring and closed the clasp twice with his fingers.

Abu Tariq came in carrying the case of a dismantled wall clock and spoke before he had finished saying hello.

—Do you have a light piece of wood for the back of this? Its owner wants his grandfather's clock exactly as it was, he wants it tomorrow, and he doesn't want to pay.

Yusuf took the case from him and judged its size by eye.

—I have a piece of sidr, but it's heavier.

—If I give him sidr, he'll say I changed the soul of the clock.

Abu Tariq noticed the key on Sami's ring.

—Opening and closing up now, are you, boy?

Yusuf said:

—He'll open in the morning if I'm late.

Abu Tariq was silent for a moment before saying:

—You know him best.

Yusuf heard what lay behind the words. He asked Sami for the fine drill bit, then went to the red case himself. Four new bits lay in their sleeves, each marked with a line he had drawn in paint pen.

He opened a small drawer and took out a folded sheet of paper. On it was a list of the tools that had disappeared five months earlier, the value of each one, and beneath that, the weeks of extra work he and Sami had agreed upon. He had not written the word theft on the sheet, and there had been no need. The day Sami returned the tools in a grocery bag, Yusuf counted them on the table, asked him which ones had been sold, and then the two of them worked out how he would repay the cost of what was missing.

There was an empty box beside the final week. Yusuf checked it, wrote in the date, then handed the paper to Sami.

—Your debt to the workshop is settled.

Sami did not reach for it.

—Take it.

He took it and folded it again.

Abu Tariq moved toward the door.

—I'll come back later this afternoon.

Yusuf caught the clock case by one end.

—Leave it. It'll be ready.

Abu Tariq left, and the sound of the clocks carried from his neighboring shop, a multitude of ticks that could not agree on a single second.

Sami said:

—You could have waited before giving me the key.

—I could have.

—After what happened?

Yusuf pointed to the paper in his hand.

—What happened hasn't vanished. You returned what you took and bore what we agreed upon. If I can't trust you, there's no point in your staying here. And if you do stay, it will be under clear rules.

Sami waited, but Yusuf carried the clock to the cutting bench.

Sami said:

—What if you sell the place?

Yusuf stopped.

—Who said we sold it?

—People are talking. They say the company will take the whole row.

—If a decision is made that affects your job, you'll hear it from me.

—There may not be a job left for me by then.

Yusuf did not promise him what he did not possess. He took out a notebook containing the names of two workshops that had asked for laborers and wrote two phone numbers on the back.

—If the workshop closes, I won't keep it from you for a single day. These two know your work.

Sami took the notebook and tucked it beneath the folded paper.

—I don't want to be a laborer all my life.

—Then learn the accounts along with the craft. A workshop can't run on a key alone.

—Bring me the piece of sidr. Take half a centimeter off it, and don't switch on the sander until I come back.

Yusuf went to repair a door in the upstairs apartment, then continued on to the hardware store to buy a box of screws. He was gone longer than he had expected and returned after the shops had begun to close. He found the shutter lowered halfway, the workshop in order, and the clock case on Abu Tariq's worktable.

Sami was nowhere to be found.

Yusuf picked up the offer file he had forgotten in the drawer and turned off the light. When he came out through the rear passage, he saw Sami beside a black car parked near the bakery. He was speaking to a man in a gray shirt with an ID badge hanging from his neck. Yusuf heard only the man's final sentence:

—Think about your livelihood before they shut the place down.

The man held out a small card. Sami took it, then turned and saw Yusuf standing at the door. His hand darted into his pocket, and the card disappeared.

The man opened the car door. The badge hanging from his neck showed the Al-Rawafid logo before he turned away.

Yusuf said:

—Who was that?

—He says they'll need workers for the new project.

—And he came into the passage to choose you?

Sami shrugged.

—He found me here.

Yusuf waited for him to add something. He did not.

—Did he ask you to do any work now?

—No.

The answer came quickly, but offered Yusuf nothing he could seize upon. He looked at the key ring on Sami's belt. The new blue tag dangled beside two old keys.

He said:

—If anyone asks you for something that concerns the workshop, tell him to ask me.

—Understood.

—I didn't ask whether you agreed. I told you what to do.

Sami raised his eyes to him.

—I understand.

Yusuf locked the door and tested the handle. The two of them walked to the end of the passage, then parted at the street. A few steps later, Yusuf glanced back and saw Sami put his hand into the pocket where he had hidden the card.

He opened his mouth to call out to him, then closed the door and walked away.

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Chapter Five

Permission to Enter

On Friday morning, twelve days after the offer arrived, Hind set her phone on the windowsill and propped it against a box of nails so the lens would remain level with the table. She did not intend to record the meeting. She was testing a frame for a video about the old crafts of the al-Sur neighborhood. The screen showed half her father's face, her uncle Nabil's hand, and the office door her grandfather had made before she was born. Rayed al-Kilani sat in the only place the sunlight could not reach.

Maryam called from the doorway:

—Put down the phone and help me with the coffee.

—It's recording for only ten seconds.

—The guest doesn't know they're only ten.

Hind stopped the recording. She had told her father that in an hour she had an online meeting to finalize a work contract, and that she wanted him to review the portfolio she would send before the meeting. He nodded while opening the

door for Rayed, and she could not tell whether he had heard the time or merely seen her lips move.

She carried the coffee tray into the office. Rayed half rose and thanked her by name though they had never met. Before him lay a slim leather file and a brochure printed with a rendering of glass buildings amid trees that looked nothing like the neighborhood's trees.

He said to her:

—You studied digital media, didn't you? You'll like our vision for this place.

Her hand paused above the tray.

—I found your published portfolio when we searched the family name, he said, as though answering a question she had not voiced.

He opened the brochure to an image captioned "The New Destination." The drawing showed the very corner where the corn seller's cart stood every evening, but the designer had removed the cart and Abu Tariq's shop and put a black-fronted café in their place. Hind set the cup before him and sat near the door.

Rayed pushed a sheet of paper into the middle of the table.

—This is our final revision. The price is as agreed, and the deadline is thirty days from the signing of the final contract. Before that, we need a full technical inspection, copies of the leases, and an occupancy schedule.

Yusuf said:

—We didn't agree to vacate the property.

—The offer is based on delivery of the property vacant.

—I know what it's based on. I'm saying we didn't agree.

Nabil shifted in his chair. His eyes were red from nights of poor sleep, and on the table before him lay a folded payroll statement for the laborers on his project. He said:

—No one is saying we throw them out tomorrow. We have a month, and we'll give each one what he's owed.

Yusuf looked at Rayed.

—What do you call what he's owed?

—Whatever the contract requires and the competent authority determines.

—We have leases that end at different times, maintenance costs paid by the shopkeepers, and

families who can't move within thirty days. We account for all that first. Then we talk.

Rayed turned his cup without drinking.

—Every delay reduces the value of the offer. The company isn't buying stories. It's buying a real-estate asset with a cost and a timetable.

Hind disliked the words, but her uncle's face made her understand why he did not object. It seemed to her that all he could see in the paper was the number of wages it would allow him to pay. Her father, meanwhile, turned the pages slowly, placing his thumbnail beneath each line as though someone would hold him to account for anything he passed over.

Rayed took out a copy of the inspection permit. Nabil's signature appeared at the bottom.

Yusuf raised his eyes to his brother.

Nabil said:

—It's only an inspection. No sale, no eviction.

Yusuf read the whole document, then placed his finger on the final paragraph.

—“Inspection of utilities and whatever measures are necessary for assessment.” What measures are necessary?

—Measurements, photographs, and a safety check, Rayed said.

—Put that in writing. And one of us must be present.

—The team works according to the site schedule. They may be early or late.

—Then they can call.

Nabil exhaled hard.

—Yusuf, they're inspecting meters, not opening a safe.

—Which is why setting an appointment shouldn't be difficult.

Rayed pulled the paper toward him, struck out the general wording, and wrote in his own hand: "Entry is limited to shared utilities, visual inspection, and taking measurements, without removing, replacing, or operating any component, and with notice to one of the owners." He signed beneath the addition and pushed the pen to Nabil, who put his initials beside it.

Rayed said:

—The signature of the owner of one half is enough to enter the common areas. The sale, however, cannot proceed without both of you.

Yusuf said:

—Nabil has the key to the side entrance. They are not to enter the workshop or the apartments.

Nabil took out a key with a brown leather tag and placed it beside the paper.

—They can take it for a few hours and bring it back.

Yusuf turned to Hind.

—Photograph the permit with the addition, and photograph the key beside it.

She raised her phone and photographed the document from above, then moved closer until Rayed's handwriting was clear. She photographed the key as well, not because she saw any importance in doing so, but because her father had said, "Everything that leaves our hands."

Rayed smiled as he returned his papers to the file.

—That level of precision will exhaust you on a large project.

Yusuf said:

—We'll do it anyway.

Rayed rose, then stopped at the door and said:

—You have until the end of the day. After that, we'll finish acquiring the plots around you, and you may find your property hemmed in by the project and worth less than half of what's before you now. The market doesn't wait for the hesitant.

Yusuf said:

—Say you'll withdraw the offer. Don't turn your calculations into a threat against us.

—Call it what you like. I'm telling you what will happen.

He shook Nabil's hand and extended his own to Yusuf. Yusuf shook it without answering the remark. As Rayed passed Hind, he handed her the brochure.

—Keep it. Perhaps one day you'll make a campaign for our project.

She looked at the glass frontage that had taken the place of Abu Tariq's shop.

—Perhaps I'll make something about it.

After he left, Nabil asked Yusuf not to turn every step into a confrontation. Yusuf answered that the permit had been signed, so there was no confrontation. Nabil said that was his problem:

he spoke so calmly that he made the other person look like the only angry one.

Hind waited for her father to answer, but he gathered the cups and placed them on the tray.

She said to him:

—My meeting is in twenty-five minutes.

He stopped and looked at her like a man remembering a promise written somewhere he could not see.

—I need ten minutes with your uncle, then I'll review the file.

—I sent it a little while ago.

—You said you wanted my opinion.

—I wanted it yesterday.

She picked up her phone and Rayed's brochure and left. In the passage, she heard her uncle ask, "And if they don't wait?" She heard her father answer, "We don't ask people to sign before they know their rights." She closed the door, unsure whether he was speaking about the tenants or about all of them.

. . .

Hind returned after eleven from the coworking space where she had held the meeting. It had not

gone as she wanted: the sound had cut out once, and then she had opened an old file instead of the latest version. Most of the al-Sur neighborhood had closed its doors, and only the bakery's light remained spilled across the pavement.

Before turning toward the house entrance, she saw a white maintenance van in the property's side passage. It blocked half the way, forcing a bakery worker to carry flour sacks around it. A blue sticker on the van's door read: "Al-Mada Technical Services."

One man stood by the meter room, while another knelt before the open electrical box.

She said:

—Who gave you permission to come in?

The standing man held up his phone. It displayed a photograph of the permit, with Nabil's signature at the bottom and Rayed's handwritten addition.

—An inspection for Al-Rawafid. Half an hour left.

—Now?

—During the day the shops are open and the load is heavier. It's quieter for testing at this hour.

The key with the brown leather tag hung from the entrance door. Hind sent her uncle a photograph of the van and asked, “Are these men here under your permit?” His reply came moments later:

Yes. They told me they were delayed. Let them finish, and don't wake Yusuf.

She lifted her phone and photographed the van again. At that same moment, a brief sound came from the meter room, like a kernel of corn popping inside a pot.

—What was that?

The kneeling man answered without looking back.

—An old breaker. We only touched the cover.

The passage light went out, then came back on. The two workers looked at each other. The one standing said:

—We're nearly finished.

Hind climbed the stairs. At the first landing, she looked back and saw the tool bag being carried to the van, the key still hanging in the door. They had a permit, a company name, and a message from her uncle. She continued upstairs

and opened her computer to fix the file she had sent by mistake.

Beyond the window, the passage light flickered a second time, then steadied.

• • •

Chapter Six

The Missing File

Yusuf left Abu Tariq's room as the sun began to whiten behind the hospital windows. The doctor had said the smoke had done more harm than the burn on his forearm, and that they would keep him under observation until evening. Abu Tariq was alert enough to ask about the clock shop, then drifted to sleep before he heard the full answer.

Yusuf told him no one had yet been allowed into the shops. He did not say that black water covered the floor of his store, that its glass frontage had collapsed inward, or that dozens of clocks had stopped at different times. He himself did not yet know what had survived.

In the corridor, Maryam slept on a bench with her arms folded over her handbag. Hind sat beside her, staring at her phone without moving a finger. She rose when she saw her father.

—How is he?

—He'll stay until evening.

—Did he say anything?

—He asked about the clocks.

Hind closed her eyes for a moment.

Yusuf's phone rang. It was the same number that had called him after dawn: the fire investigator who had asked for one of the owners to be present at the first inspection. Yusuf answered, listened, then said he would arrive within twenty minutes.

Maryam woke at the sound of his voice.

—You're not going home?

—I need to get into the office. The residents' leases and phone numbers are there.

Hind said:

—I'll come with you.

Yusuf looked at the ash still clinging to her clothes, then at her mother.

—Take your mother home first.

—Uncle Nabil is at the property. I'll drop her off and meet you there.

He did not argue with her. He had argued with her enough without meaning to, every time he said "in a little while" until a little while had become an appointment she no longer trusted him to keep.

The street in front of the workshop was no longer a street. Yellow tape stretched from the bakery's post to the sidr tree, a fire engine remained by the curb, and men in white shoe covers moved in and out. The apartment residents stood on the other side, watching the blackened windows, each of them carrying a question Yusuf could not answer.

Umm Salman stopped him before the tape.

—They said we can't go back to our apartments. For how long?

—Until the safety inspection is finished.

—Where are we supposed to go tonight?

Yusuf opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at the small bag by her feet.

—I don't know yet. I'll ask them for a written answer today. If the closure goes on, we'll gather everyone before noon and arrange temporary housing. Don't sign anything for anyone until we've talked.

She pointed to two men standing near a car he did not recognize.

—Those two asked whether we wanted quick compensation.

Yusuf looked at them. One of them looked away.

—Just take their number. No photograph of your ID, and no signature.

Nabil was inside the cordon, speaking to the investigator. He waved to Yusuf. In his hand was a clear plastic bag containing the side-entrance key with the leather tag. He said that one of the inspection workers had returned it to him after the team finished during the night.

The investigator asked Yusuf when he had last entered the office, what materials were stored in the workshop, and whether any recent electrical work had been carried out. Yusuf answered each question to the extent of his knowledge. He explained that the wood and paint materials were kept in a metal cabinet far from the meter room, that the workshop breaker had been checked months earlier, and that no one had requested any new repairs.

The investigator said:

—We'll go in through the back. Don't touch anything. If you want to take any papers, point them out first.

Yusuf followed him inside. The smell of burned wood was unlike any smell he had

known in his work. It did not resemble sawdust falling onto a hot machine, nor an old door whose edge had been eaten by fire. It was the smell of a place that had lost the names of things. The ceiling above the cutting bench was black, and the lighting wires hung down like wet ropes. The office door, however, remained standing, its lower edge swollen with water.

The investigator pushed it with his gloved hand. It was not locked.

Yusuf said:

—I left it locked.

The man looked at the metal bolt, then at the frame.

—There's no sign of a break-in here.

Inside, one chair had overturned, and the files had fallen from the top shelf when the water surged in. Yusuf knelt beside the low cabinet. The supplier invoices were in their place, the wage ledger beneath them, and the receipt box in the drawer. He reached out, then stopped when the investigator said:

—Just point.

He pointed to a hand-wide gap between two files.

—There was a blue file here.

—What was in it?

—The original leases for the shops and apartments, the maintenance addenda, and old receipts.

Nabil came closer to the doorway.

—Maybe you took it home.

—I didn't.

—Or Hind moved it to photograph it.

—She didn't.

The investigator recorded the statement, then asked:

—Who knows where it was kept?

—I do. Nabil and Sami do. Others may have seen it when we took papers out.

—And who can get into the office?

Yusuf looked at the undamaged lock.

—There are three copies of the key to the workshop's rear door: one with me, one with Nabil, and the third I gave to Sami. And the side-entrance key was with the inspection team for several hours yesterday.

Nabil turned to him.

—Sami has a copy?

—He has for several days.

—And you didn't tell me?

—He works here. He opens up if I'm late.

Nabil looked as though he would say something else, but he saw the investigator writing and fell silent.

They went out to the meter room. The technician shone a small light into the burned box and photographed several points close together. Part of the cover had melted, but two screws at the edge retained a silver gleam beneath the blackening.

The technician asked:

—Has this cover been opened recently?

Nabil said:

—There was an inspection yesterday.

The investigator raised his head.

—What inspection?

Hind arrived just then and heard the question. She stood outside the room and said:

—A team working for Al-Rawafid. I saw them here after eleven.

Yusuf turned to her.

—You saw them?

—They had a photograph of the permit and my uncle's key. They said it was a visual inspection.

She took out her phone and found the photograph of the document, then the photograph of the van. With her permission, the investigator took the phone and enlarged the sticker on the door and the license plate. The technician said that signs of the cover's having been opened did not prove by themselves that anyone had tampered with the wiring. They might have come from the inspection, from earlier work, or from what happened during the firefighting. They would need a complete examination before they could say anything.

The investigator asked her to send him the photograph of the van, and she sent it to him from the phone's share screen.

Yusuf asked:

—Did the fire start here?

The investigator said:

—There's no answer yet.

It was the first straightforward answer Yusuf had heard since the night before.

The investigator asked about the keys again. Yusuf repeated the same names, then signed the statement.

When they came out, Yusuf looked at the clock above the bakery door. It was past nine, and Sami never arrived later than eight without calling. He took out his phone. His last message to Sami the night before read, “Did you get home?” Beneath it was Sami’s reply: “Yes.”

He called. An automated voice told him the phone was switched off.

He called again, then wrote:

Sami, call me at once. Don't go to anyone, and don't give anyone anything.

He read the sentence before sending it. He deleted the final clause, then restored it and pressed send.

He raised his head. Everyone who had heard about the fire had come through the street, called, or sent someone to ask. Only Sami, the holder of the third copy, had not appeared.

. . .

Chapter Seven

A Face in the Glass

The bakery owner was one of the administrators of the neighborhood group. Before replaying the clip from the beginning, he said that his son—who had set up the camera system and could access it from his computer—had sent him a still image a few minutes earlier and asked whether the man was Sami. He had told him not to send it to anyone, but the message still showed no read receipt. Hind remained standing behind his shoulder. The footage the system had saved amounted to no more than eleven minutes; whenever the image went still, the recording stopped, turning the alley into a series of disconnected scenes instead of one continuous stretch of time.

The workshop's back door appeared in the right-hand corner, while the bakery's glass frontage took up half the screen. At 1:18 a.m., a shadow moved in from the edge of the alley. The bakery owner enlarged the image with two fingers, and its outlines broke apart into gray squares.

The investigator said:

—Play it at normal speed.

The figure approached the door. He wore a dark jacket and a cap and held something small in one hand. He did not need to push the door or test it. He inserted the key, opened it, and disappeared inside.

Nabil said:

—Stop there.

The frame froze on a sloping shoulder and half a hidden face.

Yusuf said:

—Keep going.

Six minutes of actual footage passed. The same figure emerged, securing a rectangular object beneath his jacket. When he reached the bakery's light, he glanced back. The camera did not capture his features directly, but his face appeared in the glass for a moment—a pale reflection among the bread advertisements and photographs of cakes.

Hind felt a chill in her arms before she said:

—Sami.

Her father did not look at her. He kept his eyes on the screen, one hand steady on the back of the chair.

Sami left the edge of the frame at 1:25. The recording jumped to the next moments of movement. A cat passed, then a delivery rider on a bicycle, then nothing stirred. At 2:02, a faint flicker appeared behind the workshop window. It dimmed, then returned a few minutes later, stronger.

Nabil said:

—He went in alone, came out with the file, and then the place caught fire. What are we waiting for?

The investigator replied:

—We're waiting for the report.

—If this isn't evidence, what is?

The man pointed to the timestamp.

—It proves he went in and came out. There are thirty-seven minutes between his exit and the first visible sign of fire. He may have done something whose effects appeared later, or he may not have. That's why we wait.

He requested an original copy of the recording and warned the bakery owner not to send it to

anyone. The man nodded and removed the storage device from the system in front of him. But Hind's phone vibrated before they had left the room.

She opened it. A shorter clip had reached the neighborhood group: seven seconds beginning with Sami's entrance and ending on the reflection of his face. No exit, no later timestamp, none of the thirty-seven-minute gap. Above it, someone had written: "The man who burned down Yusuf's workshop caught on camera."

Hind said:

—It's spreading.

Nabil took out his phone and began to read. The messages appeared faster than anyone could follow.

"Isn't that the worker he had?"

"The same one who stole tools before."

"Yusuf covered for him, and this is the result."

"I heard he threatened him when he found out the property was being sold."

The last statement was not true, but it was forwarded three times until it looked as though it had come from three witnesses. Hind tried to find out who had started the story about the

tools. A shopkeeper in the market wrote that months earlier he had seen Sami offering drill bits marked with Yusuf's red paint. Someone else added that Yusuf had recovered them and kept the young man on the job. Within minutes, the tools had become two crates, and then money from the workshop drawer was added to them.

Yusuf said to the bakery owner:

—Close the group now, if you can.

The man said, flustered:

—It came from my son's account. I told him not to send it, but he didn't read my message.

Yusuf went out into the street. Hind followed him, the phone in her hand still vibrating without pause. Several men had gathered by the tape; some had come to ask about the fire, others after seeing the clip. A young man thrust his screen into Yusuf's face.

—Is that Sami or not?

Yusuf said:

—It's Sami.

—Does he have the file?

—It looks as though he's carrying it.

—Then it's over.

—It isn't over.

Another man said:

—Abu Hind, don't try to cover for him this time. You forgave him when he stole from you, and he burned your livelihood and everyone else's.

Yusuf raised a hand, not to silence him, but to move the phone away from his face.

—We can see him enter, and we can see him take the file. We cannot see him set the fire.

—Who else could it be?

—I don't know. And the investigator needs more than this.

Nabil came up behind them and said:

—My brother isn't saying Sami is innocent. Don't take his words that way.

Yusuf looked at him.

—That's right. I'm not saying he's innocent.

A brief silence fell, as if no one had expected the sentence.

He continued:

—I'm also saying I don't know that he started the fire. I gave the investigator his name, number, and address, and told him about the key

and the file. Whatever is proved against him, he will answer for.

The man with the phone said:

—And the old theft?

—He stole tools, returned them, and worked until he had repaid their value. That is the story—not the two crates or the money you’ve added to it now.

The man lowered his phone slightly, but did not stop recording.

Yusuf moved away from the crowd. Hind followed until they stood at the entrance to the house. She had wanted to ask him this since she saw the key in Sami’s hand, not since she saw his face in the glass.

—You gave him a copy after he stole from you?

—Yes.

—And you didn’t tell us?

He looked at the yellow tape stretched in front of the workshop.

—I never told you about the theft in the first place.

—I know. That’s the question.

He ran a hand over his forehead, leaving a streak of ash across it.

—I thought it was between him and me as long as he returned the tools.

—But it didn't stay between you. Uncle is your partner, the keys belong to the property, and we live above it.

After a moment he said:

—I should have told all of you before I gave him the key.

—Were you wrong to trust him?

—I was wrong to make the decision mine alone. As for the key, I still don't know what it meant.

—The footage means something clear.

—It means he entered, and it appears he left with the file.

—And you are still choosing your words.

—Because once I make an accusation, I cannot take it back.

She wanted to tell him that his silence could not be taken back either, and that when she had seen the maintenance men the previous night, she had not woken him because the small distances between them had become easier than

knocking on his door. But she said nothing. She opened the photograph she had taken of the vehicle and stared at the blur of its license plate. Her own face was reflected in the phone's black glass, in almost the same place Sami's face had appeared.

Yusuf's phone rang from an unknown number.

He answered quickly:

—Yes?

A broken voice came through. Hind did not hear the first words, but she saw her father's expression change and stepped closer.

—Sami, where are you?

Yusuf turned on the speaker. Behind Sami's voice came the noise of engines and a distant announcement whose words they could not make out.

—Uncle, listen to me before you hang up. I took the file.

Yusuf said:

—I know. Where are you?

—I didn't burn the workshop. I left before the fire. The man told me only to photograph the

papers, then called while I was inside and told me to take the whole file. He was waiting for me.

—What man?

The sound cut out for a moment, then returned more faintly.

—I'm at the North Station. I have the file. Don't tell Mr. Rayed.

The call ended.

Yusuf fixed his eyes on the screen, then called the investigator in front of Hind. He repeated what Sami had said, including the name of the station and the final sentence:

—He said, "Don't tell Mr. Rayed."

. . .

Chapter Eight

A Right That Isn't Yours

Abu Tariq was sitting up when Yusuf returned to him that evening. The large oxygen mask had been removed, leaving a thin tube beneath his nose. On the table in front of him lay a transparent bag containing his ring, his watch, and the keys to his shop—things that had come out of the smoke with him and continued to perform their functions as though nothing had happened.

He pointed to the chair.

—Close the door.

Yusuf closed it and sat down. Abu Tariq's son had gone to collect the medicine, leaving the room quiet except for the sound of the machine suspended above the bed.

Abu Tariq said:

—The man in the clip—is that Sami?

—Yes.

—He took the file?

—He says he did. They found him at the North Station, and he had it with him.

—And the fire?

—He denies starting it. The report isn't out yet.

Abu Tariq ran his thumb along the edge of the bag.

—There were fifteen watches belonging to customers in my shop. Two of them I couldn't replace if I sold the shop itself.

—We'll record them one by one. We'll know what survived once they allow us inside.

—And who pays?

—Whoever is proved responsible. If Sami only took the file, then he answers for stealing it. If anything else is established...

Yusuf stopped. He did not want to finish passing judgment before he knew.

Abu Tariq said:

—I heard someone say you were going to forgive him.

—I didn't say that. I said stealing the file does not prove he set the fire.

—And your workshop?

—As for what belongs to me, I don't want to use it to add to what is held against him.

Abu Tariq raised his hand, and Yusuf stopped.

—Your workshop is your right. My lungs are not. And the watches are neither your right nor mine; their owners entrusted them to me. Don't tell people, "We forgive," as though we were all one thing standing behind you.

The man's voice dropped on the last words, and he coughed twice. Yusuf handed him the water and waited until his breathing steadied.

Yusuf looked at his hands. Blackness remained beneath two fingernails no matter how often he had washed them at the hospital.

—What do you want us to do?

—I want to know who took out the key, who tampered with the electricity, and who left the passageway until it filled with smoke. I want my treatment paid for, and the things people entrusted to me replaced. As for Sami, I don't want anyone beating him in my name.

—No one will go after him.

—Don't promise what isn't yours to control.

The second rebuke was harder than the first. Yusuf nodded.

—I will say this: no one will go after him on my behalf. And if anyone tries to attack him, we'll report it.

Abu Tariq leaned back against his pillow.

—Now I understand what you mean.

His son came in carrying the bag of medicine. Yusuf rose to give him his place, but Abu Tariq pointed toward the drawer.

—Take the small notebook. I wrote down the watches and the names of their owners. If you find a brown envelope, don't open it. There's a woman's watch inside, and she doesn't want her name on the shop receipt. Call her privately.

Yusuf took the notebook. Its cover was cracked, its pages filled in an orderly, compact hand. On the final page was the account for repairing the display-case lock Yusuf had promised to fix before the fire.

—I never repaired it, he said.

Abu Tariq said:

—Then you still have a job to do for me.

Yusuf smiled for the first time since Rayed had called him, then slipped the notebook into his pocket.

. . .

In the waiting area he found four residents of the building waiting for him. Umm Salman held a paper sent by a man who said he represented Al-Rawafid. It offered three nights in a hotel, followed by a lengthy declaration that the assistance did not constitute an admission of liability by the company for the fire.

She said:

—Do we sign or not? The children are at my sister's, and there isn't room for all of us.

Yusuf read the paper twice. It was not an explicit waiver, but he did not know its legal effect.

—I don't know what this means legally. Let's photograph it and send it to the lawyer, Salwa, tonight. But the accommodation shouldn't have to wait. I'll call them and ask that they separate the booking from the declaration.

The grocery-store owner said:

—And if they refuse?

—We'll find somewhere else, and everyone should keep their receipts. Don't appoint me your representative in anything you haven't authorized me to handle.

They looked at him in surprise. They were accustomed to handing him their papers and hearing him say, I'll look into it. He took another notebook from his pocket and drew three columns.

—We'll write down the name of each family, how many people are with them, and where they are staying tonight. Then we'll list the shop owners and the property their customers left in their care. Abu Tariq's injury is one claim, the accommodation is another, and the loss of the property is a third.

Umm Salman said:

—Didn't all of it come from the fire?

—It came from the fire, but it is not a single right I can speak for on my own.

They sat around a small table beside the water dispenser. Each person named what they needed; another corrected a number or a name. When they reached the watch shop, Yusuf took out Abu Tariq's notebook but did not open it. He wrote only: "Customers' entrusted property—list held by shop owner."

The investigator called before they had finished. He said they had found Sami at the place he had named, that the file had been

recovered, and that they would take his statement in the presence of whoever was required. He asked Yusuf not to come to the station until they called him.

Yusuf asked:

—Is he all right?

—No one has harmed him, if that's what you're asking.

—It is.

He ended the call, and those standing nearby could tell from his face that the news concerned Sami.

Before they could ask, Yusuf called the number printed at the bottom of the accommodation offer. An employee answered and said the declaration was part of a standard form and that he had no authority to separate it. Yusuf asked to be transferred to someone who did. They all waited, hold music playing from the phone on the table.

Rayed's voice came through a minute later.

—You want the rooms but don't want to sign the receipt?

—I want each resident to sign only that they received the room. Anything about liability should be reviewed by whoever represents them.

—We're paying without admitting liability. That's perfectly normal.

—Then write that sentence alone, and don't put beneath it a waiver we don't understand.

Rayed fell silent, then said the booking would be sent under the families' names and the other paper could wait until morning. Yusuf ended the call and set the phone in the middle of the table.

—The rooms are confirmed. No one signs anything tonight except their name and the number of nights.

The grocery-store owner said:

—They found him?

—Yes. He had the file.

—Then we write his name beside every loss.

Yusuf looked at the three columns, then closed the notebook.

—We write his name beside what is proved against him. The rest stays blank until we know.

The man did not like the answer, but he did not argue. When they rose, Yusuf opened the

first page again and left the box marked “Cause of Fire” empty.

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Chapter Nine

The Price of Urgency

Nabil arrived at Al-Rawafid's offices twenty minutes early. He sat in the lobby beneath a screen showcasing the new development and watched buildings rise in an animation over a neighborhood empty of people. The streets were broad, the cars few, and every ground-floor door opened onto a brightly lit shop.

He took out his phone. There was a message from Hassan, his longest-serving worker:

We need an answer today. Two of the men are leaving the accommodation tomorrow because the rent hasn't been paid.

He typed, "This afternoon," then erased it. He wrote, "I'm working on the money," and sent it. He had used the same sentence a week ago.

Rayed stepped out of the elevator, shook his hand, and gestured toward the meeting room.

—Yusuf isn't here yet?

—He'll come.

—I thought what happened might make him move faster.

Nabil disliked the way Rayed spoke of the fire as though it were a reminder that had arrived on schedule, but he said:

—My brother doesn't sign when he's being rushed.

—A comfortable virtue when the time belongs to him alone.

Yusuf came in a few minutes later carrying a thick paper file unlike the company's glossy folders. He had added the notes Salwa had sent overnight about keeping the residents' claims separate from the sale. He apologized for being one minute late, then sat beside Nabil.

Rayed did not bring out the brochure this time. He placed two sheets of paper in front of them.

—The company is prepared to increase its offer by eight percent and cover the cost of removing the damaged section. We'll pay a substantial deposit when the agreement is signed and provide the occupants with three days' temporary accommodation while arrangements for the move are completed.

Nabil looked at the figure. The increase alone would cover the men's wages and the steel

invoice. He felt his back straighten against the chair.

Yusuf said:

—Why did the price go up after part of the property burned?

—Because we want to close the matter quickly. Delay on a project of this scale costs more than the damage.

—Has the thirty-day condition changed?

—No.

Yusuf opened his file. The first page was the list he had written at the hospital.

—There are four families and three shopkeepers here. Some left without medicine or clothes; others have merchandise and property entrusted to them by customers. Three days is not enough.

Rayed said:

—That's what compensation is for. The project cannot remain suspended until every person is satisfied with a new home.

—And we cannot sell you a vacant property before we know how it is to become vacant.

Nabil cut in:

—We can set aside money from the sale for relocation. We don't have to demand everything from the company.

Yusuf turned to him.

—That's true.

Nabil had not expected him to agree so quickly.

Yusuf continued:

—First, we establish the property's value through an independent appraiser. Then we determine our obligations under each lease. Whatever we owe comes out of the sale price, and whatever extra the company offers is recorded separately. Abu Tariq's treatment, the property entrusted to his shop, and the fire investigation do not form part of the consideration for the sale.

Rayed folded his hands on the table.

—You're speaking as though we were involved in the fire.

—I'm speaking as though the fire report is not yet complete. I'm not accusing you, and I won't sign a paper that mixes the purchase of the property with the closure of other claims.

—Our team completed its inspection and left. The fire appeared some time afterward.

Nabil said:

—How much time?

Rayed looked at him.

—That is a question for the investigation, not for me.

Yusuf took out a copy of the entry permit and placed it beside the offer.

—The added clause says: no removal, no replacement, no activation. Hind saw the electrical panel open and the passageway lights go out.

—She saw technicians inspecting an old building. If you have an accusation, submit it to the proper authority.

—We have reported what we saw. That is why I am keeping the investigation separate from the sale.

Rayed pushed the two sheets toward them.

—The offer stands until two o'clock. After that, I cannot guarantee the figure, the accommodation, or that we will remain interested in the plot. I'm not threatening you. That is the cost of a business decision.

Yusuf said:

—We'll send you an answer after the valuation.

—You won't get an independent valuation in three hours.

—Then you won't get my signature in three hours.

His voice did not change. Nabil felt angry with both him and Rayed: one had set a deadline without mercy, while the other could afford to say no because the workers were not sending messages to his phone.

Rayed stood.

—Mr. Nabil, you may sell your share alone if you wish. Our offer for it would naturally be lower, but it remains available.

Nabil did not look at his brother.

Yusuf said:

—That is his right. He also knows that selling a share neither vacates the property nor extinguishes the occupants' rights.

—I told you not to speak for me when I'm here, Nabil said.

—Then I'll speak for my share.

Yusuf closed his file and looked at Rayed.

—Nabil will answer you about his share, and I'll answer about mine. If we agree to sell the whole property, we'll sit down with a contract that does not load the fire onto the price of the land.

They left the office without shaking hands. In the elevator, Nabil could still see the new figure behind his eyelids.

He said:

—Do you want to sell or not?

—If the building is unfit, the value is established, and we discharge what we owe, then yes.

Nabil turned toward him.

—You've spent two weeks making me think you were going to bury yourself under the workshop.

—You've spent two weeks asking me to sign a condition we don't know how to fulfill.

—And the offer expires in an hour and a half.

—If the offer expires before we review the contract, let it expire.

The elevator doors opened. An elderly man stood waiting in the lobby with another property

file in his hand. The brothers walked out into the street.

Yusuf said:

—Hind found a licensed appraiser who can begin today. We split his fee.

He took the appointment message from his file. The appraiser had requested photographs of the property, the leases, and the preliminary damage report, and had set his fee before learning of Al-Rawafid's offer. Nabil read the name and price, then handed the paper back.

—You pay now, and I'll settle with you when we sell.

—I'll pay half now, and you pay half when you can. I don't want a report that belongs to me alone and then ask you to believe it.

Nabil did not say yes, but he photographed the paper with his phone.

And saved the appraiser's appointment in his calendar.

—My debts are waiting on yet another report.

—I know they won't wait. But that extra eight percent tells us they have more room than they said.

Nabil's phone rang. A private message from Rayed appeared:

If you sign the sale of your share before two, I'll transfer the deposit today. Don't let Yusuf's conditions cost your workers their rights.

He read it twice. Yusuf had walked ahead toward his car and had not seen the screen. Nabil raised a finger to reply, then stopped. He put the phone in his pocket without deleting the message.

He had not accepted. But for the first time, he concealed from his brother an offer that could save him alone.

. . .

Chapter Ten

The Closed House

Hind played the clip for the fifth time. Her father appeared beside the yellow tape with a phone held up in front of him, then his voice came through clearly:

—We can see him enter, and we can see him take the file. We cannot see him set the fire.

She trimmed the seconds before the statement and kept what followed: the man asking him, “Who else could it be?” and her father replying that he did not know. Above the clip she wrote, “When a man refuses to turn anger into evidence.” She did not mention that the man was her father, though the account bore her name and photograph and half the neighborhood knew their connection.

She pressed Publish.

In the first few minutes, comments came from her friends: “A voice of reason,” and “We need more voices like this.” Then someone reposted the clip beside a still image of Sami at the workshop door and wrote, “Property owner

defends his worker despite his appearance at the scene of the fire.” Another poster removed the mention of the theft and kept only “We cannot see him set the fire,” as though Yusuf were speaking after the report had been issued, not before it.

Hind sat on the edge of the sofa replying to every comment. She wrote that the investigation was not over, that the maintenance worker had entered before the fire, and that Al-Rawafid had been pressuring them to sell the property. The app deleted her response twice because it was too long, so she divided it into three.

In the third response, she mentioned that Abu Tariq had been carried from the shop wearing an oxygen mask and that her father had been the first to direct the firefighters to where he was. She did not ask Tariq or his father whether they wanted his injury to become part of her defense.

Maryam called from the table:

—Put down the phone and come here.

—One minute.

—You inherited that minute from your father.

Hind looked up. Yusuf had come through the door carrying a small metal box and two

notebooks. He set them on the table and sat without taking off his watch. He looked as though he had arrived for another meeting, not come home.

Maryam said:

—Open the box.

He looked at her, then removed the key from his key ring. Inside were receipts, an old account book, and envelopes, each marked with the name of a shop or apartment.

She asked:

—How much of the workshop income did you use to cover overdue rents and repairs that weren't solely your responsibility?

—I calculated it today. Twenty-eight thousand four hundred over two years.

Hind's fingers stopped above the screen.

Maryam said:

—When I asked why we had postponed fixing the kitchen leak, you told me the workshop's income was low.

—It was low.

—Because some of it was going here, and you didn't tell me.

Yusuf opened one of the notebooks and pushed it toward her.

—The money came from my share after expenses. I didn't take it from the household account.

—I'm not accusing you of stealing from the household. I'm saying I arranged our needs around a figure that wasn't real, and you promised Hind help with her move without knowing whether you could provide it.

Hind said:

—What about Uncle? Did he know?

—He didn't know all the amounts.

She laughed without humor.

—So no one knew but you.

—That's why I brought the notebooks.

—After the shop burned down.

He did not answer. He opened his phone and placed the appraiser's message and a copy of the claimants' list in front of them.

Maryam said:

—Don't let the papers answer for you. Why didn't you tell me about Sami?

—I thought the theft was over when he returned the tools.

—And you gave him a key that opened the contracts room.

—Yes.

—Why?

He thought before answering.

—Because he completed what he owed and worked for five months without taking anything. I believed that denying him trust after that would be a punishment we had never agreed upon.

Hind said:

—But the key wasn't yours alone.

—It wasn't mine to decide alone.

Maryam said:

—Everyone in the neighborhood can reach you. We learn about your decisions only after they become a receipt or a key in someone else's hand.

Yusuf raised his eyes to hers.

—What do you want from me now?

—Don't ask us about every nail, she said. Tell us about any decision that might change our home before you make it. And if you promise

someone regular payments, put them in an account we can see.

Hind said:

—And if you place trust in someone over something that affects us, don't make us discover it through a bakery camera.

He nodded. He took out the box key and set it in front of Maryam.

—The notebooks stay here, and we review them every Thursday. Anything concerning the property, I'll put in writing to Nabil.

Maryam said:

—Keep your copy. I want us to review the books together.

Yusuf returned the key to his ring and left the notebooks on the table.

Hind's phone vibrated. The number of views had surpassed what she usually reached in a month. A message had arrived from Al-Rawafid's corporate account, containing a short statement for publication:

The authorized technical inspection concluded before the incident, and the team departed the site. The company confirms its full cooperation with the competent authorities and regrets the

*circulation of unsubstantiated allegations
affecting its employees and partners.*

Beneath the statement was a question: “Do you have evidence to support what you wrote about pressure from the company?”

Yusuf watched the clip she had posted on her phone. He did not ask her to delete it.

—Does the viewer know when I said this?

—I wrote that it was after the fire.

—An hour afterward, or after the report?

She reread her comment. She had not said.

—They took it out of context, not me.

—And you gave them what they needed to do it.

She said sharply:

—If we leave the story to them, they’ll put Sami alone in the frame and turn you into the man hiding a criminal.

—Correct what you got wrong. As for them, we answer with what can be proved, when it can be proved.

Hind opened the post settings. She wrote a clarification stating that the clip had been recorded before the fire report was complete, that

Sami had admitted stealing the file, and that she had no evidence identifying who caused the fire. She posted it as a pinned comment, took a screenshot, and then deleted the original post.

The spread did not stop. Copies remained on other accounts, some of them without the full audio.

A new message arrived, this time from the recruitment officer at the organization that had sent her the job offer:

A public discussion connected to your account has come to our attention. Before approving the final contract, we need clarification about the nature of the content and your relationship to the parties mentioned.

She placed the phone facedown. Across from her, her father was explaining the first entry in the notebook to Maryam, who stopped him each time he passed over a number without a date.

Hind opened the message again and wrote a response that neither defended the clip nor concealed her connection to the people in it. She said that she was the property owner's daughter, that she had posted from her personal account before the facts were complete, and that she had since corrected what she published. She attached

a link to the correction and left the organization to decide after reading both versions.

Hind pulled a chair up to the table and asked her father to begin the first entry again from the start.

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Chapter Eleven

An Incomplete Confession

Two days after the fire, the investigator called Yusuf and asked him to come in, formally identify the contents of the file, and attend a limited confrontation concerning the key and the papers. He said Sami's lawyer had been notified, and that the rest of Sami's statement would remain in the investigation record.

Yusuf called Nabil, then stopped by and picked him up. His brother kept turning his phone over in his hands, opening the camera footage and closing it again without playing it.

Nabil said:

—If he says you sent him, what will you say?

—What happened.

—I mean, he might try to implicate you with something you said. You gave him the key.

Yusuf looked at the road.

—I gave him a key for work, not to take the file.

—Good. Say it exactly like that.

Yusuf understood his brother's fear. Every word was now capable of raising the property's price or bringing it down, of shifting suspicion from one pair of hands to another.

At the investigation office, they sat in a narrow corridor that smelled of paper and a coffee machine. A police officer passed carrying Sami's bag inside a clear plastic sack. Through the gap in the zipper, Yusuf recognized the corner of the blue file and saw, beside it, a white business card and a small phone.

A few minutes later, the investigator opened the door and placed the file on a table before them. It was wet along one edge, not from the water used to put out the fire, but from a bottle that had spilled inside the bag. Yusuf turned through the papers one by one: the contracts for the four apartments, the shop contracts, maintenance receipts, copies of old identity cards, and the property plan his father had drawn in pencil. None of the original documents appeared to be missing, but their order had changed. The investigator then showed him photographs recovered from Sami's phone, and Yusuf recognized pages from those same contracts.

The investigator pointed to the card inside a small evidence bag.

—Do either of you recognize this name?

Yusuf read: “Ziyad Mansour — Asset Development — Al-Rawafid Company.”

—I saw the logo when he was speaking with Sami, but I didn’t see the name.

Nabil said:

—He works with Rayed. He came to the site with him once, but he didn’t enter the meeting.

The investigator recorded his words, then asked them to wait. When he returned, Sami was behind him, with his lawyer at his side.

He was not handcuffed. He sat at the other end of the table, his lawyer beside him. Gray dust covered his jacket. He raised his eyes to Yusuf, then lowered them. He did not look at Nabil.

The investigator said:

—In your presence, we’ll establish only what concerns the file and the key. The rest of the statement follows a different procedure. Sami, start from the beginning.

Sami wet his lips.

—Ziyad met me at the workshop. He said they needed photographs of the contracts, that Mr.

Nabil was a partner, and that Uncle Yusuf was holding up the sale.

Nabil said:

—When?

The investigator raised his hand.

—Let him finish.

—He offered me three thousand. One thousand upfront and two thousand after the photographs. I didn't take the thousand that day. I only took his card.

The investigator asked him:

—And then?

—I called him on the night of the fire.

Yusuf raised his head. Sami kept his eyes on the edge of the table.

—Why?

—I needed the money.

—What for?

—That's in the other statement.

The investigator did not press him in front of them. He told him to continue.

—He said, "Go in after the bakery quiets down and photograph the blue file." When I arrived, I saw his car at the far end of the street. I went in

with the key. The electricity was off in the back, so I used my phone's light. I opened the cabinet and took out the file. He called while I was inside and said, "Don't photograph it. Take the whole thing and come down." He was waiting at the end of the passage.

—And you handed it to him?

—No. As I came out, a patrol car drove past in the street, and he motioned for me to keep going. Afterward, he sent me a location near the station and said we would meet there. I waited for him, then saw fire engines heading toward the neighborhood. I called him, but he switched off his phone. After that, the conversation disappeared from the app.

—The messages may have been temporary, or deleted from both ends, or you may have deleted them yourself. We'll examine the device.

—They used to disappear. His number stayed in the call log.

The investigator took out printed copies of the phone log. Yusuf could not see them clearly, but he saw a succession of brief calls around the time Sami had entered and left.

Nabil said:

—And the fire?

Sami shook his head quickly.

—I didn't start anything. I didn't touch the electricity. I went into the office, took the file, and left.

—You stayed on the run for an entire day because you took some papers?

—I saw the video spreading, and people said I'd burned the place down. If I went back, they would take me before I had a chance to speak.

Yusuf spoke for the first time.

—So you called me.

Sami looked at him.

—I didn't know who else to call.

—You could have taken the file to the authorities investigating the case.

—I was afraid.

Yusuf found nothing in his face to prove the statement or disprove it.

Sami said:

—Uncle Yusuf, tell them you gave me the key.

—I told them.

—And that I used to open the workshop by myself.

—I told them that too.

—Then I didn't break the door, and I didn't—

Yusuf cut him off:

—I gave you the key for work. I did not give you permission to enter at night or take the file. I will not change that sentence.

Sami shifted in his chair and looked at Nabil as though waiting for another door to open, but Nabil turned his face away.

The investigator said:

—Did Yusuf or his brother promise to give up their rights if you returned the papers?

Sami said:

—No.

—Did anyone ask you to conceal Ziyad's or Rayed's name?

—Ziyad said from the beginning that Mr. Rayed didn't want to know the details. After the fire, I was afraid to tell Rayed, in case he found out where I was.

Yusuf asked:

—Did Rayed ever speak to you himself?

—No.

Rayed's name had come from the mouth of an employee carrying his company's card, not from any call or message from Rayed himself.

The investigator gathered the papers and said the file would remain with them until they had finished photographing it and formally recording its contents. Then he asked Yusuf and Nabil to sign the report identifying their property.

Nabil took the pen first. Yusuf, however, read every line to the end and amended a description that called it "the stolen file belonging to Yusuf."

—The file belongs to the property, the property is shared by my brother and me, and it contains original documents pertaining to the tenants.

The investigator corrected the wording, and Yusuf signed.

At the door, Sami called after him:

—Uncle.

Yusuf stopped.

—Are you going to leave me here?

There was nothing in the question about Abu Tariq, or the file, or the fear he had left behind in the homes of the neighborhood. Even so, Yusuf

could not see him as nothing more than a face in a recording.

—I'll call your family. Your lawyer is with you, and he knows the procedure. But I will not say you didn't steal, and I will not promise you this will pass without consequences.

—And the fire?

—If you didn't start it, lying for you about the theft won't help you. Tell them everything you know, and let the evidence take its course.

Yusuf left and closed the door behind him. The investigator remained with Sami and the blue file on the table.

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Chapter Twelve

Two Wrongs, Not One

Before Yusuf returned from the investigators' office, a sentence of unknown origin had spread through the al-Sur neighborhood: "The man who burned the workshop has confessed." It did not say that Sami had admitted stealing the file and denied setting the fire.

Hind saw the sentence in three different groups, each time beside a different image of the same man. In one, his face had been lifted from the reflection in the bakery window; in another, from an old photograph taken in the workshop; in the third, from a training badge he had posted a year earlier. Beneath each picture was a complete story written by someone who had not been in the interview room.

Hind opened a long screenshot she had saved of her post before deleting it the night before. It showed the text and the comments accusing her of polishing her family's image and turning Abu Tariq's injury into media material. She closed it when she heard voices in the street.

From the window she saw an investigation vehicle stop near the bakery. She heard the investigator tell the baker that they would retrace Sami's route on the night of the fire and identify where the car that had waited for him had stood. An officer asked the onlookers to remain behind the movable barrier.

Hind went outside. Her father was with Umm Salman, talking about two furnished apartments they had found for the families, while her uncle Nabil stood near the building's locked gate. Tariq, Abu Tariq's son, had been allowed inside the barrier to retrieve his father's medicine and the shop ledger. The instant Sami appeared, he set down the box and moved toward him.

He spoke loudly enough for the whole passageway to hear.

—Is that him?

No one answered. He advanced until he was one step away from Sami.

—Look at me.

Sami raised his head. His lip was cracked from dryness, and his eyes moved from face to face without settling.

—My father breathes through a machine because of you.

One of the investigators said:

—Step back, please. We are conducting a procedure.

—What procedure? There's a picture of him going in before the fire. What else is left?

He thrust out a hand and shoved Sami in the chest. The officer caught his arm, but Tariq wrenched free and tried to strike again. Yusuf was closer than the second officer. He stepped between them, and Tariq's fist struck his shoulder and slid against the side of his neck.

Yusuf took one step back, then held his ground. He did not raise a hand.

—I will neither take your father's right from you nor waive it. But you will not hit him.

—You're protecting him after what he did?

—I'm protecting him from a beating now. There are people responsible for investigating the fire.

The two officers closed around Tariq and moved him away. Several people raised their phones. Hind raised hers as well, then pointed

the lens at the ground and let the recording run so there would be a record of what happened.

A man at the back of the crowd said:

—Yusuf never learns. He covered for him the first time, and now he's standing there as his shield.

Yusuf turned toward him.

—No one is covering up what has been established. Sami entered the workshop and took the file. He has admitted that.

Umm Salman said:

—And what do we expect from a man who steals the file before the fire?

—We wait for evidence about the fire.

—That is philosophy. We have been driven from our homes.

Yusuf lowered his voice when he answered her.

—I know the waiting weighs heavily on you. But stealing the file is one offense, and the fire is another. The first does not prove the second.

From behind the officer, Tariq said:

—And my father?

—His injury is a right that will not be lost, whether Sami caused the fire or someone else did.

Nabil came closer to his brother and spoke loudly enough for those nearby to hear.

—Let the investigator talk. Every sentence you say becomes a clip of you defending him.

—I did not defend his theft.

—People do not hear the distinction.

—Then we do not erase the distinction before they can hear it.

Nabil glanced at the raised phones, then moved away. Hind watched him open a message and close it again. It seemed to her that he was calculating what another image would do to the company's offer and the money he was waiting for.

The investigator asked everyone to clear the passageway. Sami moved forward under guard and pointed to the workshop's rear door.

—I went in through here.

—What was the lighting like?

—It was dark at the back. Only the bakery was lit.

—Did you smell smoke?

Sami hesitated.

—It wasn't smoke. It smelled like hot plastic, the way a wire smells when it heats up, but it was faint.

Tariq said:

—He's already preparing his story.

The investigator did not look at him. He asked Sami where the smell had come from, and Sami pointed to the wall separating the office from the meter room. Then they walked to the far end of the passage, where Sami said Ziyad's car had been waiting.

—What color was it?

—Black.

—What make?

—I don't know. It was parked behind a white maintenance van.

Hind looked up. The photograph she had taken that night came back to her, along with the blue decal on the door. She opened her photo gallery, but the officer asked everyone to move farther back. She retreated as she searched through dozens of images.

The investigator stood at the point Sami had indicated. From there, the bakery camera could

not see the end of the street; a metal utility box and a tree blocked its view. He photographed the spot, then returned to the vehicle.

Before Sami got in, Tariq called after him:

—If you didn't burn it, you stole from it at least.

Sami stopped but did not answer.

Yusuf said:

—Yes. He stole the file.

Tariq turned to him, disconcerted by the agreement.

The officer opened the vehicle door, and Sami climbed inside. It moved slowly through the people. They did not disperse after it left. They separated into two circles: one said the fire had begun the day Yusuf gave away the key; the other said the company had found a poor young man on whom to pin the crime. Neither circle had the fire report.

Yusuf stood at the building entrance, rubbing the place where the blow had landed on his shoulder. Hind came to him and opened the photograph of the white van. A small icon at the top showed that the phone had captured a

moment of motion along with it, not a single frame.

—This was here about two hours before the fire, and the picture I sent the investigator was compressed.

Yusuf looked at the screen, then at the investigation vehicle just about to turn the corner.

—Tell him you have the original. Don't try to enhance it.

Hind wrote a brief message: "I have the original file and a sequence of photographs from the night of the inspection. Do you want them as they are?" Then she moved her finger away from the neighborhood group and sent it only to the investigator's number.

He did not reply at once. She kept the phone in her hand and sent nothing else.

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Chapter Thirteen

The Signature

Nabil knew the document had been discovered when the investigator placed an image of the bank transfer in front of him. The description at the bottom was clear: “Reservation deposit for a property share — al-Sur district.” The amount was one hundred and eighty thousand, and the sender was a subsidiary of Al-Rawafid.

Yusuf sat to his right. He neither moved nor asked a question. To Nabil, his silence was harder than an interrogation.

The investigator said:

—We need to understand the nature of this payment and its connection to the sale agreement.

Nabil took out his wallet and drew out a sheet of paper folded into quarters. It was not the original; Rayed had kept that and given him a copy. He spread it on the table. Three signatures appeared at the bottom, one of them his. Completion of the reservation was conditional on delivering the property vacant.

—It is an agreement to reserve my share if the sale goes through.

Yusuf said:

—When did you sign it?

Nabil kept his eyes on the paper.

—The evening we left the Al-Rawafid office.

—After we parted at the car?

—Yes. I called Rayed and went back alone. I did not sell the property. I reserved my share, conditional on the consent of the other owners or a partition.

The investigator read the clauses. The deposit was refundable if the sale became impossible for reasons beyond Nabil's control, but it would be doubled if he withdrew after the conditions had been met. He asked where the money had gone.

Nabil opened his banking app and laid the phone before him. It showed transfers to employees of his business: overdue wages, money owed to a supplier, and an installment on a machine he no longer owned. Less than a quarter of the deposit remained in the account.

—I did not take it for myself.

The investigator replied:

—We are establishing the path of the money, not judging why you took it.

Nabil wished he had not said that. He needed someone to hear the reason, not merely record it. For three months the same messages had been arriving: one man asking for his wages because his son's university payment had fallen due; another saying his landlord had served him notice; a third asking for nothing, simply sending his account number every Thursday. When the deposit arrived, Nabil paid what he could. That night, a worker sent him a message: "The wages came through. You saved my household." Nabil closed the phone before reading the rest, and the word saved stayed with him until he sat before the investigator.

The investigator laid out images of another conversation.

—These messages are between you and Rayed al-Kilani?

—Yes.

From where he sat, Yusuf read the first line. Rayed had written: "Hesitant owners begin to move when the occupants feel that staying will not be comfortable. We start with offers to vacate, a safety inspection, and formal notices."

Beneath it was Nabil's reply:

Do only what is lawful. I do not want trouble with the residents.

Then another message from Rayed:

We know how to move the file forward. What matters is that no one backs away at the first complaint.

Nabil had replied:

Do not involve me in the details, and keep everything within the law.

The investigator raised his eyes.

—What did you understand by “move the file forward”?

—Calls, compensation offers, notices that some leases were ending, and a report on the condition of the building. That is what he said before it.

Nabil remembered two things Rayed had said in an unrecorded meeting: “When people see an urgent report about danger, they will ask to leave of their own accord,” and, “The team needs to see the worst of the building, not write Yusuf a reassuring report.” He almost mentioned them, then let them go. At the time, he had understood

them as a demand for a severe report, not an order to alter anything.

—Did you know a maintenance company would enter at night?

—I knew about the inspection. I signed the authorization and handed over the key.

—Did you know they would open the electrical cabinet?

—The authorization forbids removal or replacement. I thought they were taking photographs and measurements.

—I did not ask what you thought. Did you know?

—No. Had I known, I would not have agreed.

He did not look at Yusuf as he said it. He remembered his own message—Do not involve me in the details—and could not keep it outside his answer.

The investigator asked him about Ziyad. Nabil said he had seen him with Rayed twice and had spoken to him only to arrange inspection times. He denied asking him to take the file or contact Sami. When the questions were over, he signed his statement.

This time, he read the statement before he signed it.

After the leather-tagged entrance key had been photographed, the investigator returned it to him. Nabil put it back on his key ring without looking at it.

. . .

The brothers went out to the car park. The sun was fierce, and the inside of the car was hotter still. Nabil opened the door but did not get in. Yusuf stood on the other side, the roof of the car between them.

Yusuf said:

—Why did you hide the deposit?

—Because it concerned my share.

—Your share, yes. But the agreement tied it to clearing an entire property.

—And it tied it to your consent. I did not sign for you.

—You set time working against us without our knowing.

Nabil gave one joyless laugh.

—Time had been working against me for months, and you knew it. Every time I spoke

about the wages, you said we would look for a solution that did not wrong the residents. We looked. You never brought me a solution.

—You had the right to ask for your share to be sold or partitioned. You did not have the right to hand the work of pressuring people to a company.

—And you? You had the right to manage your own share as you wished, not to turn the whole property into an open-ended promise to everyone who lived in it. You lowered rents, extended some leases, and paid for repairs out of the income before asking me. You behaved as though the half of the property you inherited from our father had become a trust in your hands to distribute.

The words struck him. Nabil saw it in the pause of Yusuf's hand above the door handle, but he did not withdraw them.

Yusuf said:

—You are right that I made decisions on my own.

—Do not say it so easily.

—It is not easy.

—It sounds easy when you say it. You admit it, and you remain the man who admitted his fault. I remain the man who took the deposit.

Yusuf opened the door, then shut it without getting in.

—You knew they would apply pressure.

—Yes. I knew about the offers, the notices, and the assessment. I did not know about sabotage or fire.

—And you wrote: Do not involve me in the details.

—Because I did not want to stand at every tenant's door and tell him to leave so I could pay a wage. I wanted the company to do what the contract allowed.

—And if they crossed the line, you would not know.

—I told them to stay within the law.

—And asked not to know if they did not.

Nabil raised his voice for the first time.

—Do not make me a partner in the fire.

Yusuf did not raise his.

—I am not. I told the investigator what I know, not what I fear. But you are a partner in the pressure that opened the door for them.

Nabil sat in the car, leaving the door open. He took out his phone and showed his brother the remaining balance.

—If the agreement fails because I withdraw, they can demand twice the deposit. The money is gone. Do you have a solution for that too?

Yusuf looked at the figure.

—We calculate what is left and review the agreement with a lawyer. If you owe a right, we repay it from your share or in some way we agree upon.

—Then sign, and all of this ends.

—I will not sign before we know the residents' rights, the value of the property, and the cause of the fire.

—Even if I lose everything?

—I will not sign. And tonight I will sit with you and review the debt and the agreement.

Nabil shook his head. The sentence offered neither rescue nor complete hostility, and that angered him more. He removed the side-entrance

key from his ring and placed it on the roof of the car.

Yusuf said:

—The key is yours. You are a co-owner.

—Keep it until the investigation is over.

—I do not want to take it from you this way.

—And I did not want the company to take my key this way, but I handed it over all the same.

Nabil closed the door and drove away. In the mirror he saw the key slide from the roof and fall, then saw Yusuf bend to pick it up. He turned his eyes back to the road.

. . .

Chapter Fourteen

What the First Camera Did Not See

At midnight, a message from the investigator reached Hind:

The image you sent is compressed. We need the original file exactly as it came from the phone, and any photograph taken immediately before or after it. Do not adjust the light or crop the image.

Maryam was asleep in the next room. Yusuf lay on the sofa, a notebook beside him in which he had been tallying the cost of temporary housing. Hind opened her computer and connected her phone. The photographs from the night of the inspection appeared in order: the door of the coworking space from which she had attended the online session, a cup of coffee, a pharmacy window, then the white van in the side passage.

The image she had sent earlier was not a single still. Her phone had saved a second and a half of movement with it, a feature Hind usually kept on and then forgot about. She opened the original file frame by frame. In the selected still,

light from the bakery struck the number plate and erased two digits. A fraction of a second earlier, the light had been weaker and the plate clearer.

She used no enhancement program and asked no tool to guess what was missing. She paused on the frame in which the digits appeared as the lens had captured them and exported it together with the full file. Then she opened the preceding photograph. The van door bore the name “Al-Mada Technical Services.” A small work card was visible through the windscreen; its words could not be read, but its color and logo differed from the company decal on the door.

She checked the file data. Time: 11:38 p.m. Location: the eastern passage of the property. The next photograph had been taken four minutes later. In it, the cover of the electrical cabinet stood open, and a man’s back blocked the view inside.

Her father’s voice came from behind her.

—Why are you still awake?

She turned. He stood in the doorway holding a glass of water.

—The investigator asked for the original. The vehicle number appears in one of the motion frames.

He came closer to the screen but did not reach for the mouse.

—Have you sent it?

—I'm about to.

—Send the entire sequence.

She selected everything she had taken from the moment she saw the van in the passage and attached the originals. In the message, she wrote that she had seen two men, that one had shown her an image of an entry authorization, and that she had neither entered the meter room nor seen what they did inside it. Then, on a separate line, she added that she had heard a pop and seen the passage light go out, then come back on.

Yusuf said:

—Include the picture of the authorization too.

She added it and sent the message.

Her father sat on the edge of the other chair. This time, he did not ask why she had not told him that night. They had already spoken about it. She had said that the authorization and key had made her think the matter was settled. He had

said that he had made the household wait for news from him so often that they had learned not to wake him until after a problem had happened.

Hind opened the screenshot of her deleted post and created a new draft beside it.

—I have to correct this.

Yusuf read the old headline visible in the screenshot, then left the screen to her.

—Do not publish anything the investigator told you in confidence.

—I know.

—And do not turn the correction into a defense of us.

She looked at him.

—Were you angry about the post?

—I was angry because you mentioned Abu Tariq's injury before asking whether he wanted it made public, and because you put my face at the center of the story. But I was angry with you before I told you why. That was my fault.

Hind closed the screenshot. The new draft remained blank.

. . .

In the morning, the investigator called. He asked Hind to attend alone at first, as the person who had taken the pictures. He then allowed Yusuf and Nabil to sit in when the findings were presented, because the matter concerned entry into their property.

On the screen, he displayed the frame Hind had extracted. He said the plate belonged to a vehicle registered to Al-Mada Technical Services. The company had confirmed that two of its men had entered the property under a work order sent through a contracting platform used by Al-Rawafid for acquisition inspections.

Nabil said:

—We know that. I signed the authorization.

—What we knew was the authorization for a visual inspection. The wording of the internal work order is broader.

He displayed another page. The task field read: “Load testing and preparation of an urgent risk report.” The designated contact was Ziyad Mansour, the same employee whose business card had been found in Sami’s bag.

Yusuf said:

—Does that prove they tampered with the electrical system?

—It proves they were there, who sent them, and that the task concerned electrical loads rather than photography alone. By itself, it does not prove that they caused the fire. The two technicians say they opened the cover, measured the current, and restored it exactly as it had been.

—And the report?

—They did not upload it to the system. Their manager says Ziyad asked for a draft directly before it was approved.

Nabil asked:

—Did Rayed request that?

—We have no final answer yet. Rayed says Ziyad coordinated the procedure within his authority and denies asking for any unauthorized intervention. We are reviewing the correspondence and the technicians' tools, and awaiting the examination of the panel.

The work order moved the maintenance van from the background of Hind's photograph into the path of the investigation. What had happened inside the electrical cabinet remained under examination.

The investigator asked her not to publish the plate number, the technicians' names, or the work order. He allowed her to say that she had given the inspection photographs to the competent authority and that the cause of the fire had not been determined.

She returned home and opened her account. She did not restore the old post. She wrote a separate correction:

A necessary correction: Yesterday I published a clip without its full context in defense of my father, and in my replies I added incomplete information about the inspection. What the recording establishes is that Sami entered the workshop and took the file, which he has admitted. No final report has yet determined the cause of the fire. A technical inspection of the property took place that same night, and I have delivered the original photographs to the investigating authority. The photographs alone do not establish anyone's responsibility for the fire.

I was wrong to publish before the facts were complete, and to mention Abu Tariq's injury without asking his permission or his family's. I apologize to him, to his family, and to everyone

affected by the post.

Yusuf read it from beginning to end. He did not change a word.

—Send it to Abu Tariq before you publish it.

Hind called Tariq and asked him to read it to his father if he was awake. Minutes later, he sent a short message: “My father says: Do not write that your father rescued me. The firefighters were the ones who went in and brought me out.”

Hind added that the firefighters had brought Abu Tariq out after Yusuf directed them to the location of his shop, without crediting Yusuf with the rescue. Then she published the correction on her account and sent it to the same groups that had received the clip.

The first comment appeared in less than a minute:

“Every day you change your story.”

Hind placed the cursor in the reply box. She wrote, “Yes. I changed what I wrote because some of it was inaccurate,” and pressed send.

The first post had traveled farther and faster, and might reach people who would never see her apology. She pinned the correction to the top of

her page and left the publication time visible beneath it, with no picture of her father.

. . .

Chapter Fifteen

The Man Behind the Offer

Rayed chose a table at the back of the hotel café, far from both the lift and the windows. When Yusuf arrived, an untouched cup sat before him, along with a gray folder whose cover bore no Al-Rawafid logo.

Rayed said:

—I asked to meet with you alone.

—And I told Nabil I was coming.

Rayed raised an eyebrow.

—You do not trust me?

—I do not want another meeting my partner learns about only after it is over.

He gestured for Yusuf to sit. He opened the folder and drew out a two-page offer, shorter than anything he had presented before.

—This is not the sale contract. It is a preliminary settlement. We confirm the higher price; the company pays for one month of accommodation for the occupants and a moving allowance for every family, as well as a separate sum for Abu Tariq's treatment and the shops'

losses. In return, the two of you sign the sale within seven days and end any civil claim against Al-Rawafid connected with the maintenance team's entry.

Yusuf read the first page, then the second. At the bottom was a paragraph prepared for publication. It stated that the owners possessed no evidence linking the company to the fire, and that the inspection had ended without any intervention in the building's utilities.

—I cannot sign this.

—Because you have evidence?

—Because I have no answer. The statement says they did not intervene, while the work order says they were assigned to test the loads.

—Taking measurements is not an intervention.

—It is not for me to decide. The report has not been issued.

Yusuf put the paper back on the table.

Rayed said:

—You are not signing away a criminal case, and no one could ask you to do that. We are ending a civil dispute that may last for years. Every family receives money and housing, your

brother escapes his debt, and you open another workshop. Where is the harm?

—The residents' claims do not belong to me, nor does Abu Tariq's injury. Make each person an offer concerning what belongs to him.

—You are the one who brought them together, and you are the one stopping them now.

—I collected their names. I did not take possession of their voices.

Rayed leaned back. A café attendant passed and asked whether he wanted more coffee. He said no and waited until the man had moved away.

—I came from a neighborhood like this, Yusuf. My father rented a warehouse for thirty years. When the building was sold, he walked away carrying a key that opened nothing. No good man stood beside him and counted his losses. We took what we could and began again. Cities do not wait until everyone finds a door that suits him.

—Then you know that thirty days may not be enough.

—I know that six months will not be enough for someone who refuses to leave. In the end, the

property will be sold. People will leave. And you will discover that all you did was delay the money, not prevent the outcome.

Rayed opened to a page in the folder and turned it toward him. The project's financing was conditional on completing the purchase of the plots within eighteen days; beneath the condition was a table of deposits already paid to four neighboring owners.

—If the deadline passes, we have to renegotiate all the financing, and we may lose what we paid for the other plots. I am not asking for speed because I enjoy tight deadlines.

Yusuf said:

—It may be sold. I told Nabil that, and I told the residents. But they do not have to leave in the dark.

Rayed ran a finger along the edge of the folder.

—You still speak as though we started the fire.

—I did not say that.

—Your daughter's clip, and my company's name in her replies, said enough.

—Hind corrected her post. And you sent technicians at night with a work order broader than the authorization. That is established too.

—Ziyad coordinated the work. If he exceeded the bounds of his assignment, he bears responsibility for what he did.

—And the theft of the file?

—An employee tried to obtain documents he would have received when the sale went through. I did not order him to steal anything.

—But he told Sami that you did not want to know the details.

Rayed laughed without sound.

—And the word of a thief about an employee is now evidence against me?

—No. That is why I did not call it evidence. I only asked you.

Rayed pulled the paper back and turned it face down.

—Why must everything be difficult with you?

—I did not ask you to raise the price or pay for treatment in exchange for a waiver. I asked for an independent valuation, a defined period for moving, and for the fire case to remain separate.

—I received the valuation. Our offer is higher.

—I know.

Rayed paused and lifted his eyes from the folder.

Yusuf said:

—The price is not my problem now. Send a sale contract with no release concerning facts that have not yet emerged. Make each resident an offer in his or her own name, and we will consider it.

—So we take the land from you and remain under investigation and exposed to claims?

—You are not buying your innocence with the price of the land.

Annoyance showed on Rayed's face, then disappeared. He opened his phone and placed the call log before Yusuf.

—On the night of the fire, you asked me how I knew. Ziyad called me at 2:09 and said smoke was coming from the building. I was on my way to a neighboring plot. I told him to meet me there and give me the inspection draft before morning. I arrived, saw the fire, and called you. I gave this log to the investigator.

He opened his email and showed Yusuf a message that had arrived about half an hour

before the call. Its subject was “Preliminary photographs,” and it contained images of the meters and an unfinished table. Neither flame nor smoke appeared in the photographs, and the wording offered no final judgment on the building’s safety.

—That is what I saw before I went to the neighborhood, Rayed said. I asked for a rapid report, not a fire. If the technicians or Ziyad made a mistake, I was not the one who put the cover back with my own hands.

Yusuf read the time of the message and the sender’s name, then returned the phone.

—I did not say you intended the fire. The question is what you asked for that brought them this far.

—I asked them to show the danger as it was because you and your brother were treating the building as though it could wait another ten years.

—A report can show danger without creating it.

—If it is proved that they created it, hold them to account. Do not turn every urgent instruction into a crime because its consequences went wrong.

—Then why did you not say on the first night that Ziyad had called?

—Because I knew how it would look. And now you are looking at me exactly that way.

—I am looking at you this way because you said you happened to be passing.

Rayed put the phone back in his pocket.

—I was nearby. I shortened the story.

—And the shortened version concealed the man who sent the team and spoke to Sami.

Rayed did not answer. He returned the two sheets to the folder and closed it.

—The offer remains open until tomorrow evening. After that, the company withdraws it and defends its name as it sees fit.

Yusuf stood.

—Send the copy to Nabil. Do not present me with what concerns him behind his back.

—Your brother knows how to protect his rights.

—And I know now that learning about it after the meeting is not enough.

Yusuf left the hotel and sat in his car before starting it. He photographed the card on which

he had written Rayed's terms and sent it to Nabil, Maryam, and Hind in a single group he had created that morning. Beneath it he wrote: "This is what he offered, and this is what I answered. We will review the papers if he sends them."

Maryam replied first: "Received."

Then the investigator called. He said Sami had requested a meeting with Yusuf in the presence of his lawyer and had something to add about the night of the fire.

Yusuf looked toward the hotel entrance. Rayed had come out and stood beneath the canopy, speaking on his phone.

Yusuf told the investigator:

—I will come at whatever time you set.

. . .

Chapter Sixteen

Sami Without a Beautiful Story

Sami's lawyer sat at the head of the table and placed a yellow notebook between himself and his client. The investigator sat at the other end with a supplemental statement form before him. It was not the interview room they had used before. This one was smaller, with a glass panel in the door, beyond which an employee passed from time to time.

The lawyer said to Yusuf:

—Sami asked you to be here because he wants to correct part of his account in front of the person it concerns, not because he is asking you to waive a claim. Any discussion of legal rights remains within the formal process.

Yusuf nodded. Sami kept his eyes on the notebook.

—Speak, the lawyer said.

Sami began:

—When I called you, I said Ziyad first asked for pictures of the file and then asked for the

whole thing. That is true. But I did not tell you everything about why I agreed.

Yusuf waited.

—I told the investigator I needed money. He thought I had a debt, and I did not correct him. I did not have a large debt.

—Then why?

—I wanted a motorbike so I could work in delivery. I found a used one, and the owner wanted a down payment. I was going to leave the workshop after I got the money.

Yusuf raised his eyes to him.

—Without telling me?

—If I had told you, you would have begun looking for another workshop for me or speaking to someone. I wanted to leave on my own.

—So you chose to leave with a file that was not yours.

—I know.

He said it neither apologetically nor defiantly. It emerged softly, like an answer he had memorized. The lawyer opened the notebook and wrote a line.

Sami said:

—Whenever someone said you had given me a chance, I felt I was not working—I was repaying you with my life. Abu Tariq looked at the key as though you had handed it to a thief. And you took out the paper about the tools in front of him.

—I took it out to prove that what you owed was settled. I did not tell him what was written in it.

—He understood.

Yusuf remembered Abu Tariq's silence and his brief remark: "You know him better."

—I should have spoken to you in private, he said.

Sami lifted his head, and something like a quick victory appeared in his eyes.

Yusuf continued:

—But that does not make your theft of the file my fault.

The thing in Sami's eyes disappeared.

—I did not say it did.

—Say everything you want to say, and do not make me carry your decision because I made a mistake with you.

The lawyer intervened.

—Continue with the night of the fire.

Sami laced his fingers together.

—When I went in, the smell of hot plastic was already there. During the reenactment, I said it was faint. It was stronger than I said. The cover of the meter room was not sitting properly, and the light at the end of the passage kept going out and coming back on.

—Why did you not say that the first time?

—I was afraid they would say I knew there was a danger and left it.

—Did you think of calling anyone?

—I did.

—And then?

—Ziyad called and told me to take the file and come down. I was afraid that if I went out to alert someone, he would flee and not pay me. I thought the smell might be from the inspection; the building had old wiring.

The lawyer set down his pen.

—This point will be added to your statement, and it may raise questions about your failure to warn anyone. Do you understand?

—I understand.

Yusuf said:

—And after you saw the fire engines?

—I could have called. But the clip had not spread yet, and I was afraid they would find the file with me and say I had started the fire. I stayed at the station. Every decision after that made turning back harder.

—It did not make it impossible.

—I know.

Silence settled over the room. Beyond the glass, an employee walked past carrying paper cups. Then the corridor was empty again.

Sami said:

—People say you are still defending me.

—I say you stole, and that it has not been proved that you set the fire.

—Tell them I did not set it.

—I do not know. I say what I know.

—You know me.

—I know that you worked for me and returned tools you had taken, then took a file after I gave you a key. Knowing you does not prove what you did that night.

Sami pushed his chair back a little.

—Then why did you come?

—Because you asked me to listen, and because what you say about the night of the fire may preserve your rights and other people's. I did not come to free you from the consequence.

On the supplemental statement form, the investigator recorded the smell, the loose cover, the flickering light, and Sami's failure to warn anyone. He read it back to him sentence by sentence. Sami asked that the phrase "became certain there was a danger" be changed to "noticed something unusual." He said he had never been certain. The investigator agreed, because the second wording was what Sami had actually said.

The lawyer said:

—The matter of restitution for the file remains. The documents were returned, but their owners incurred expenses obtaining replacement copies, changing locks, and attending appointments. Mr. Yusuf, do you wish to submit your estimate now?

Yusuf took out a sheet prepared by the lawyer Salwa. It listed the cost of the new lock, copies of the contracts, and the working hours lost to the procedures. It included neither the value of the workshop nor Abu Tariq's injury.

—This concerns the taking of the file. The fire is a separate matter, and Abu Tariq's injury is his right.

Sami read the figure.

—I do not have it.

—No one said you have it today, the lawyer said. The amount is established, then repayment is proposed according to what the authority decides and what you can afford.

Sami said:

—I have tools at home.

—First make an inventory of what you own, the lawyer said. Do not make a promise here when you do not know how you will fulfill it.

Sami looked at the paper again.

—You can reduce it.

—If a line item proves not to have resulted from what you did, we remove it. But what remains does not all belong to me alone.

The lawyer placed the paper with the record and noted that it was an initial claim subject to review, not a final acknowledgment by Sami.

Before signing, Sami asked:

—If you open another workshop, can I come back?

The question came at the wrong moment, but its honesty disturbed Yusuf more than a carefully arranged apology would have.

—I do not know whether I will open one, and I do not know where your case will leave you. If the authority asks me about your work, I will say that you learned the trade and returned what you took the first time. I will also say that you betrayed the key the second time. I will not erase one half for the sake of the other.

—So that means no?

—It means today is not the time for that question.

Sami lowered his eyes to the paper. He signed his name at the bottom, then returned the pen to the lawyer.

Yusuf rose. At the door, Sami said:

—Uncle, the motorbike was not worth it.

Yusuf turned toward him, then left without answering.

. . .

Chapter Seventeen

The Household Accounts

Hind placed the valuation report in the middle of the table and opened it to the page of final figures. Nabil sat opposite her, with the bag of papers from his business beside him. Yusuf and Maryam sat side by side for the first time since the conversation about selling had begun. Neither held a notebook the other could not see.

Hind said:

—The land is worth more than we estimated. After the fire, the building itself is worth little beyond what can be removed or reused. Al-Rawafid's latest offer is above the valuation, but the condition of a rapid vacancy shifts a large part of the cost onto us.

Nabil said:

—I know how to read a summary.

—You asked me to read it to everyone.

He lowered his eyes to the paper.

—Go on.

Hind had not spoken privately with her uncle since the brothers returned from giving their

statements and the family learned about the deposit.

She turned the page.

—The valuer recommends offering the property to more than one buyer after the safety report is issued, with no less than ninety days for handover. Salwa divided the sums into three categories: what we owe under the leases; what those harmed may claim from whoever caused the fire; and moving assistance we choose to offer ourselves, without calling it compensation for a right that does not belong to us.

Maryam said:

—We begin with what is owed.

Yusuf took out a statement. He did not push it to the center before Maryam had looked at it.

—The deposits on the apartments and shops, repairs two tenants paid for that have not yet been exhausted, and rent for the days of closure. These come out before the sale proceeds are divided.

Nabil said:

—Agreed.

—Then we offer a moving allowance in equal shares.

—How much?

Yusuf named a figure. Nabil opened the calculator on his phone and multiplied it by the number of units.

—That is more than the leases require.

—Yes.

—Then say it will come out of your share.

Yusuf moved to answer, but Maryam spoke first.

—Do not say that until we calculate your share, what our household needs, and what a new workshop will require if you open one.

He looked at her, then returned his pen to the paper.

Nabil said:

—I will pay half the amount the lawyer proposes as a reasonable moving allowance. Anything above that is for each of us to choose from his own share.

Yusuf wrote it down.

—Agreed.

Hind said:

—And Abu Tariq?

—His treatment and losses belong in the claim against whoever caused the fire, Yusuf said. If the judgment is delayed and he needs money urgently, we do not call what we give him a waiver of his right.

Nabil said:

—Who pays the urgent amount?

—We sit with him and ask. Then I say what I can pay from my share after I review it with Maryam.

Maryam lifted her pen from the page.

—That way I know before a promise becomes a debt.

Nabil opened his bag. This time he took out a complete statement of his debts, together with a copy of the deposit agreement.

—Of the one hundred and eighty thousand, forty-two thousand remains. I put it in a separate account today. The rest went to wages and the supplier, as you saw. If they demand the deposit back before the sale, I do not have it.

Yusuf said:

—The lawyer said we should ask them to freeze the claim until the effect of their breach on

the contract is determined and the investigation reaches its conclusion.

—And if they refuse?

—The debt is recorded against you and paid from your share when the property is sold.

—Just like that, Nabil said.

Yusuf did not reply. Hind put another sheet in front of her uncle.

—This is a list of what you paid the workers. If anyone accuses you of taking the money for yourself, you have proof of where it went.

Nabil looked at her.

—Thank you.

It was the first word exchanged between them since the fire that carried no defense within it.

Maryam said:

—This household's accounts remain.

She opened the family ledger. She wrote down the cost of the kitchen repair they had postponed, enough money for three months, and what Yusuf would need to rent a small workshop and buy basic tools if his old ones could not be salvaged.

Yusuf said:

—And Hind’s move?

Hind answered:

—The organization has not withdrawn its offer. They accepted the correction, but asked me to keep my personal account separate from their work. I will begin in a month if I send the contract. I have enough for the first accommodation. I need help only with the deposit.

Her father said:

—I promised you the whole amount.

—You made that promise before you told us about the accounts. I do not want my move to become another debt you hide.

She did not know whether the words hurt him, but he wrote “Hind’s housing deposit” on the family page and asked her for the upper limit. She gave him the figure, and he wrote it down exactly.

Two hours later, the draft proposal was complete. Nabil agreed to offer the property through an independent broker with a ninety-day handover period. Yusuf agreed that a sale was likely and that he would not promise the residents the building would remain. Maryam

insisted that any additional sum Yusuf chose to give from his share must return to the table before he promised it to its recipient.

Nabil asked:

—Do we take the proposal back to Al-Rawafid if they remove the settlement?

Yusuf answered:

—We include them among the other bidders if their offer remains. We do not give them an exclusive right to buy, and we do not reject a higher price merely out of anger.

Maryam said:

—And the investigation?

—It remains separate, Hind said, reading from Salwa's memorandum. The sale neither proves their responsibility nor denies it.

They set conditions to be sent by the broker to every buyer: the handover period; the sums to be held back before the proceeds were divided; and no requirement that any resident waive a claim for an injury or loss outside the lease. Nabil said that so many conditions might lower the price. Maryam said they should calculate the reduction before calling it a loss; the difference might

simply be what they would have paid after the sale in any event.

Yusuf wrote down the name of everyone who would attend the residents' meeting, leaving the claim field beside each name blank.

—We present the same proposal, he said. Each person states what concerns him.

An email arrived for Hind. She opened it. The structural engineer's preliminary report appeared on the screen. She read its final paragraph more slowly:

—“The surviving sections can technically be repaired; however, returning the building to safe use would require extensive work whose cost approaches most of the value of the structure. Occupancy is not recommended pending a final decision.”

Yusuf did not say the workshop would return. He took the report and placed it over the account for the new tools.

Nabil said:

—We tell the residents tomorrow.

Yusuf said:

—We tell them about the report and the proposal, not about a decision before they have been heard.

This time, Nabil did not object. He gathered his copy of the papers and left the other on the table where everyone could read it.

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Chapter Eighteen

Rights on Paper

Salwa arranged the tables in a square rather than in rows facing a platform. She said the meeting was neither an announcement of a completed sale nor a reconciliation session from which everyone would emerge satisfied. It was an attempt to learn what had been agreed and what remained in dispute.

Yusuf arrived half an hour early, carrying seven folders in different colors. In front of each family and shopkeeper, he placed a copy of the relevant lease, receipts, and the record of that person's claim. The originals remained with Salwa.

She told him:

—Do not answer for me on matters you do not understand.

—Understood.

—And do not promise an amount before your brother agrees and you write it down.

He looked at Nabil, who was setting a small calculator beside his notebook.

—We agreed.

Abu Tariq entered leaning on his son's arm. He refused the chair near the door and chose his customary place beside the grocer. The burn mark remained on his forearm, and now he paused midway through a sentence to draw a deeper breath, but he insisted on speaking for himself.

Salwa began with Umm Salman. Seven months remained on her lease, while the owners proposed handing over the property after ninety days.

Umm Salman said:

—My son is in his final school year. If I move him far away now, his route to school and his review classes change. Money will not find me a nearby apartment when every landlord knows I am in a hurry.

Nabil said:

—Her period can be extended alone, but the buyer may lower the price if the property is not delivered in full.

Salwa asked him:

—Do you reject the extension?

He looked at the debt schedule before him, then said:

—No. I want to know its cost, and I want it entered against our share, not charged to the other residents.

They wrote one hundred and twenty days instead of ninety. For the remainder of her lease, they recorded two options: the buyer could wait until it ended, or offer her housing and moving costs if she agreed to leave early. Umm Salman asked who would guarantee payment of the allowance. Salwa explained that the agreed amount would be held back from the sale proceeds before they were distributed. Only then did Umm Salman place her initials beside the proposal. She did not sign the final settlement.

Then came Abu Tariq's turn. His list was longer than anyone else's: tools, shop furniture, fifteen customers' watches, medical treatment, and income lost during the days of closure.

Nabil said:

—We cannot assess the sentimental value of the watches. We establish either the repair cost or the market value.

Abu Tariq said:

—Two of them have no market value. One was inherited from its owner's father. The other was brought by a woman before her daughter's wedding. I am not asking you to put a price on the memory. I am asking you not to put down a number and say their owners' rights have ended.

Salwa said:

—Then the two are recorded as damaged items held in trust, and the assessment of liability for them remains in a separate claim. They are not included in the payment for vacating the shop.

Abu Tariq looked at Yusuf.

—And do not pay me from your share, then ask me to sign that I have received everything due to me.

—I will not.

—Write it down.

Yusuf wrote: "Any urgent assistance does not constitute final settlement or waiver of a claim." Salwa pushed the paper toward Abu Tariq. He read it, then said he did not like the word assistance. It was not charity if the money was to keep his shop operating temporarily. They changed it to "interim payment," and he signed only to acknowledge receiving a copy.

The grocer objected to the valuation of his stock. Some of the goods had been ruined by water rather than fire, and the insurer was demanding records he had not kept. Nabil took old photographs of the shop from the inspection file. They showed the shelves before the fire. He said he would send them to the grocer and continued turning through the pictures until he found a clearer angle.

Umm Ziyad's old lease had expired, and the receipts Yusuf had written were the only proof that her occupancy had continued. She said:

—If you had written me a new lease when I asked, I would not be sitting here now proving that I did not enter the house yesterday.

Yusuf said:

—You are right. Your lease should not bear the consequence of my delay.

Nabil said:

—But a receipt does not turn into seven new years.

Her face hardened.

Salwa intervened before the conversation became a negotiation over memory. She explained that the length of occupancy and the

rights attached to eviction required independent review, then recorded the owners' agreement to a moving allowance without treating that as acknowledgment of the disputed term. Umm Ziyad asked for a week to consult someone she trusted. They wrote it down.

Only Abu Bassam remained. He had closed his shop a month before the fire but left some of his tools there. He said that twenty-five years as a tenant entitled him to a share in the increase in the land's value, and that he would not leave with the price of used tools.

Nabil said:

—A tenancy does not become ownership merely through the passage of time.

—And the two of you did not become owners of the neighborhood merely because an inheritance document said so.

Yusuf shifted in his chair, then looked at Salwa before answering.

—I cannot tell you that you own a share of the land. We will establish what is due to you under the lease and for the tools. If you have another claim, put it in writing and have it reviewed independently.

—So you refuse.

—It means I do not have the authority to agree.

Abu Bassam closed his folder and stood before the meeting ended. Yusuf did not stop him, nor did he say the door would remain open. Salwa gave him a copy of the claim and a date for a response. He took it and left.

After three hours, five papers bore preliminary approval and two bore the words “Under Review.” No one applauded. Each person gathered a copy, asked what came next, then returned to the place where he or she was living temporarily.

Yusuf and Nabil signed the minutes, with every disputed clause left exactly as it was. Nabil rejected wording that implied they had guaranteed a buyer would accept every demand, so Salwa changed it to say that they would present the demands as part of the sale conditions. Yusuf rejected describing the moving allowance as “an act of generosity by the owners,” so they wrote its name without description. The final copy was less warm than the conversation, but more exact.

Umm Salman remained by the door. She said to Yusuf:

—Tell me without papers: will the building be demolished?

He looked at the open structural report before him.

—Most likely it cannot be restored for us at a cost we can afford. No demolition order has been issued yet, but I do not want you waiting on a promise that you will return.

She held his gaze for a moment, then drew the folder against her chest.

—You should have said that on the first day.

—I did not know it on the first day.

—Today you know.

—Today I am telling you.

She left. Yusuf, Nabil, and Salwa remained to put the chairs back in place. On every table was the circular mark left by a cup of water. In the center, Abu Bassam's folder remained closed at the page he had not signed.

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Chapter Nineteen

A Brother's Testimony

Nabil read the fire report in his car before going inside. He did not understand the names of the components the expert mentioned, but he understood the conclusion: the fire had begun in the shared electrical system after the maintenance team's inspection. The two technicians had gone beyond a visual inspection and performed an operational test not permitted by the authorization. They had then left part of the system in an unsafe condition. Heat accumulated after they departed, and the flames appeared later.

The report found no accelerant and no evidence that anyone had intended to burn the building. It described the fire as the delayed result of an unauthorized procedure and negligence in restoring the site to a safe condition.

The report ruled out Sami as the person who started the fire. The theft of the file remained on its separate track.

There was another paper in Nabil's bag, sent by Al-Rawafid's lawyer. The company offered to withdraw its claim for double the deposit and defer repayment of the original sum until the sale, provided Nabil signed a declaration that everything agreed between him and its employees was contained in the messages and contracts, and that he had received no oral promise or instruction concerning the residents' removal or the safety report.

He read the declaration several times. He could sign it if he called what Rayed had said "general conversation" rather than an agreement. In Nabil's presence, Rayed had never asked anyone to burn, sabotage, or touch a wire. In an unrecorded meeting, he had merely said: "When people see an urgent report about danger, they will ask to leave of their own accord. The team needs to see the worst of the building, not write Yusuf a reassuring report."

Nabil had asked him then: "Without changing anything?"

Rayed had answered: "No one wants any damage. We want a report that does not bury the defects."

Nabil had left the exchange out of his first statement. He convinced himself it added nothing: the written authorization prohibited alterations, and Rayed had disavowed any harm. But the report made what he had omitted heavier than what he had said.

He entered the government building five minutes before his appointment. Al-Rawafid's lawyer stood in the corridor beside Rayed. Rayed rose when he saw him.

—Did you read our offer?

—I read it.

—We are not asking you to change your testimony. Only to confirm that the contracts and messages constitute the complete agreement.

—They were not complete.

The lawyer said:

—General discussion about a risk inspection does not prove an instruction to exceed the authorization. The declaration protects you from a financial dispute unrelated to the investigation.

Nabil looked at Rayed.

—You said the urgent report would make people leave.

—I said an honest report might do that. And that is true.

—And you said to show them the worst of the building.

—Meaning document the defects. Do not turn the sentence, after the fire, into an order I never gave.

Nabil did not answer. He gave his name to the employee at the door and went inside.

Yusuf was waiting at the far end of the corridor. He did not approach or ask what Nabil would say. He merely indicated an empty seat beside him. Nabil remained standing until the clerk called his name.

In the statement room, the fire report, the earlier messages, and Nabil's first statement were placed before him. The investigator asked whether he wished to add anything in light of the technical finding.

—Yes. There are things Rayed said in a meeting before the inspection that I did not mention.

The investigator asked him to repeat the words as he remembered them and distinguish between language he was certain of and the

meaning he had understood. Nabil did. He recounted the sentence about the urgent report, the sentence about the worst of the building, his question about making no changes, and Rayed's answer that no one wanted any damage.

—Why did you not mention this the first time?

Nabil ran his thumb along the edge of the paper.

—Because I had a contract and a deposit, and because I wanted to believe the words changed nothing so long as the authorization restrained them. I was afraid of losing the deal. I did not think I was concealing evidence. Now I see it is part of the context.

—Did you understand that Rayed wanted a defect to be manufactured?

—No. I understood that he wanted a severe report that would push the residents to agree. If I had understood that he wanted anything changed in the electrical system, I would not have given them the key.

—Did you ask him to pressure the residents?

—I agreed to the offers, notices, and what I believed to be lawful measures. And I wrote that

they should not involve me in the details. I wanted the result without seeing the means.

The investigator wrote down the sentence and read it back. At one point, Nabil asked him to remove the words “I knew” and replace them with “I expected,” because the first claimed more certainty than he had possessed. The clerk corrected it.

When they finished, Nabil placed an image of the settlement offer on the table.

—This reached me yesterday.

The investigator read it and asked whether Nabil had signed. He said no, and the offer was added to the file.

Nabil signed his amended statement. Afterward, he went with Salwa to the escrow account and transferred the forty-two thousand that remained of the deposit. He signed an acknowledgment that the remainder of the original amount would continue as a disputed debt, to be deducted from his share on sale or resolved according to the outcome of the dispute. The claim for double the amount was neither waived nor established. The figure remained suspended over whatever came next.

He came out in the afternoon. Rayed was no longer in the corridor. Yusuf remained in the same place, holding two cups of water. He handed one to Nabil.

—I told them everything.

—Good.

—Do not say it as though I did you a favor.

—I did not.

Nabil sat and drank half the cup at once.

—The report says they did not intend the fire.

—I read it.

—I did not intend for it to come to this either.

—I know.

Nabil looked at him.

—But you will not say that is enough.

—It is not enough to repair what happened.

Nabil took out the transfer receipt and handed it to his brother. Yusuf read the amount and returned it.

—We put the remainder into the sale account before we divide anything.

—If there is still a sale after my testimony.

—We offer it to someone else.

They rose together. At the building entrance, Nabil saw Rayed's car leaving from the other side. He did not know where the investigation would end for Rayed, Ziyad, or the technicians. He knew only that the deal he had wanted no longer waited upon his signature, and that his belated words would neither restore the workshop nor pay a single wage on their own.

His phone vibrated with a message from Hassan, asking about the employment reference Nabil had promised him when the business closed. Nabil opened a new document, wrote down how long the man had worked for him and the duties he had performed, and sent it before reaching the car.

The reply came: "Received. May God reward you."

Nabil folded the transfer receipt and placed it in his wallet, in the same compartment where he had kept the deposit agreement.

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Chapter Twenty

What Does Not Return

Seven months after the fire, Yusuf stood across the street from the property and watched it being demolished.

The demolition had not come as a surprise. The order was issued after two reports, and the land was offered to three buyers. Yusuf and Nabil chose an offer that was not the highest, but allowed them one hundred and twenty days for handover and accepted that the agreed sums for the tenants would be placed in a separate account before the sale proceeds were divided. Al-Rawafid was not the buyer. It withdrew its offer as the investigation widened. A dispute then began between the company and Nabil, ending with the return of the forty-two thousand held in escrow and the deduction of the remainder of the original deposit from his share upon sale, while the demand for double the deposit was dropped. None of this released anyone from the continuing case.

On the day the property was vacated, the brothers sat with Salwa before a schedule of

transfers. First came the residents' deposits, then the moving allowances, the interim payments to the shopkeepers, and finally the remainder of the original deposit from Nabil's share after accounting for the amount held in escrow. Nothing reached either brother's account before the recipients' confirmations had arrived. Abu Bassam objected, so the disputed amount remained withheld without delaying anyone else's share.

When the brothers' net shares appeared, they were far smaller than the figure Rayed had offered on the first day. Nabil used his to clear what remained of the debt to the steel supplier and the employees' final wages. Nothing remained with which to revive his business. Yusuf set aside money for the new workshop and the household reserve Maryam had written down, then left the balance untouched until any claims involving the property itself were concluded.

Even so, the demolition moved faster than Yusuf had imagined. The machine entered through the rear wall first, at the place where Umm Salman used to hang her children's clothes to dry. The upper apartment fell, exposing the

color of a room whose inner wall had never seen sunlight. Dust mixed with the water sprayed by the workers, and for several minutes the entire building vanished behind it.

Nabil stood beside him wearing a hard hat the site supervisor had given him. He no longer owned his business. He had closed it after paying the remaining wages and selling the equipment. He found work as a supervisor on a small project for a fixed salary. It was not the work he had planned, but he no longer woke each morning with the wages of men he did not know how to pay hanging over him.

He said:

—Father used to say this wall could not fall.

—He meant if you pushed it with your hands.

—He never tried this machine.

Nabil smiled, then adjusted the hard hat on his head. They did not speak about the deposit agreement. Its figure had been settled in the statement they signed.

Several former residents stood at the edge of the street. Umm Salman had moved to an apartment slightly farther from the school and used part of her allowance to pay for a shared car

that carried her son and two classmates. She did not like the new neighborhood, and told Yusuf so whenever she saw him. Umm Ziyad rented a place near her daughter after the review of her lease ended with a longer period than had first been offered. She signed the settlement on the final day and made no apology for taking her time.

Abu Bassam did not come. He pursued his claim until he and the owners agreed on the value of his tools and the duration of his occupancy, without establishing any share for him in the land. He continued to say that the amount was worth less than the years of his life in the shop. Yusuf did not try to convince him otherwise.

Abu Tariq sat in his son's car with the window open. His breathing had improved, but he could no longer tolerate dust or long periods on his feet. He rented a workbench inside an electronics shop and returned the surviving watches to it. Of the two watches that could not be repaired, he agreed on compensation with the owner of one. The owner of the other first refused money, then accepted payment in installments. Her name remained in his ledger, and her father's watch

remained with him in a box, with no promise that he could repair it.

Before the machine began on the shopfronts, Yusuf told him:

—We can leave if the dust tires you.

—If it tires me, I will say so. Do not make decisions for my lungs again.

There was something of a joke in his voice and something that had not yet become a joke. Yusuf nodded and remained beside him without closing the window.

The workshop sign fell with part of the façade. For one moment, only the word DOORS remained visible above the pile of timber; then a section of roof covered it. Yusuf did not ask the operator to stop the machine and retrieve it. One end was charred, and it would never serve on a new frontage.

His phone vibrated. A notification had arrived from the account holding court-ordered payments: a small installment in Sami's name, the first payment in the schedule for restitution arising from the theft of the file and damage to some of its contents. It was worth less than a good lock. Yusuf showed it to Abu Tariq.

The man said:

—It has begun.

—It has begun.

Sami's case had been separated from the cause of the fire. Judgment was entered for his unauthorized entry into the workshop and theft of the file, and he was ordered to make restitution under a schedule whose first payment had now arrived. After the technical report, the fire was not attributed to him.

Ziyad and the two technicians were each referred to court according to the conduct attributed to him: inducing Sami to take the file, exceeding the inspection order, and leaving the system in a condition that caused the fire. Rayed's and the company's responsibility remained disputed in part of the case. Salwa kept copies of the claims so that every person with a right would receive news of his own claim in his own name.

The demolition supervisor approached.

—We are about to reach the side passage. It would be better if you moved farther away.

Nabil helped Abu Tariq move his chair to the opposite pavement. Yusuf remained for a

moment, looking at the two doors: the workshop's rear door, which the blue key had opened, and the shared side entrance through which the maintenance team had entered with the leather-tagged key. Both now hung without locks in a wall that protected nothing.

Nabil called:

—Yusuf.

He crossed the street to join them. The machine resumed its work, and the two entrances fell together.

That evening he stopped at a small shop he had rented ten minutes away. The floor was empty except for a used workbench and three toolboxes he had bought after checking the cost with Maryam. He stood in the middle and marked out with his eyes the place for the new door, the accounts shelf, and the chair where a customer would wait.

Nothing in the place came from the old workshop except the way his hands measured timber and the way he tested a lock twice.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Yusuf's Door

Hind stood on the short ladder, holding one end of the sign while Nabil drove in the final screw. The name appeared on a single line: “Yusuf’s Door — Doors and Locks.” She had chosen simple, unadorned letters. At first, Abu Tariq objected, saying the frontage needed something people could see from the far end of the street. She replied that anyone at the far end of the street could read the name, and that was enough.

She climbed down and stepped back to photograph the frontage. The shop was no larger than half the old workshop. A workbench stood on the right with shelves of locks behind it. At the back was a single cutting machine and a work area Yusuf had separated from the customers with a glass partition. The door bore the opening hours: eight to twelve, and four to eight. Beneath them were an emergency number and the sentence: “The inspection appointment and fee are confirmed before departure.”

Beside the workbench, Maryam hung a smaller board listing the call-out fee, the method

for paying a deposit, and a space for the delivery date. Yusuf left the final line blank.

—What have you forgotten? Hind asked.

—The people who cannot pay in full.

Maryam said:

—Do not write “free” and decide it on your own. Write: “Written payment arrangements are available according to the work.”

Yusuf wrote it, then added a separate ledger for the jobs whose cost he chose to bear from his own money once he understood them. He put it beside the accounts, marked differently from the customers’ debts.

Nabil tested the door.

—It catches at the bottom.

Yusuf said:

—Because you raised the upper hinge farther than I told you.

—You said three millimeters.

—I said two.

Nabil took out a tape measure.

—We measure. Do not turn your memory into a written contract.

Hind laughed. They removed the hinge and measured, only to discover that the doorframe itself leaned slightly. Yusuf placed a thin shim behind the hinge. Then they tested the door until it closed without catching.

Nabil took out the invoice for the hinges and placed it on the workbench.

—These are at warehouse price. Do not call them a gift or record them behind my back in another account.

Yusuf read the figure and paid it from the workshop till.

—Received?

—Received.

Each signed the ledger.

Maryam arrived carrying a pot of coffee and a small envelope. Yusuf took a new key from the envelope, tried it in the lock, then handed it to her.

She asked:

—Where is the other copy?

He raised his key ring.

—With me. There is no third copy at present.

—And if you need an employee?

—We make him a key under an employment contract, and everyone concerned knows about it before it leaves my hand.

Maryam put the key in her bag. Then she opened the accounts ledger to its first page. It showed the capital for the tools, the rent, the amount Nabil had paid, and a reserve that could not be touched without their agreement. She checked the addition and corrected a figure Yusuf had entered in the wrong column.

Abu Tariq came in carrying a small wall clock.

—A door workshop is not complete without a clock to be late by.

He hung it above the shelf and set the time. Yusuf asked him how much it cost.

—It is used, and the movement needs cleaning. Put it on the first month's account.

—Give me a receipt.

—You ask me for paperwork now?

—Yes.

Abu Tariq wrote a receipt and put down a value lower than Yusuf had expected. Yusuf did not argue about it before asking whether that was what he wanted. Abu Tariq said yes, and they both signed. He then sat in the customer's

chair, drank his coffee, and left before the shop grew busy.

At noon, Umm Salman came carrying a photograph of the door in her new apartment. It scraped the floor, just as the workshop door had.

—Can you come by today?

Yusuf opened his appointment book.

—I have two appointments, and I am taking Hind to the station before sunset. Tomorrow at nine.

—You used to come when you were passing anyway.

—And I used to be late getting home. If the door will not close, I will send someone now. If it only scrapes, tomorrow at nine.

She said it closed. He wrote down the appointment and the expected cost and gave her a copy. She read it, then said:

—Tomorrow—not sometime in the afternoon.

—Nine o'clock by Abu Tariq's clock.

She left smiling.

At four, a man came in wanting four doors for a new office. The job would suit the workshop well at its beginning, but he wanted Yusuf to measure at six that evening and deliver within a

week. Yusuf calculated the time, then said he could measure at ten-thirty the next morning and deliver in ten days.

The man said:

—I will pay extra if you come today.

Yusuf looked at Hind. She was placing her bag near the door and did not intervene.

—I cannot come today. If tomorrow suits you, I will write down the appointment now. If your work is more urgent, I can give you the numbers of two other workshops.

The man hesitated, then chose the next day. Yusuf wrote down the specifications, took a deposit against a receipt, and placed a copy in the file.

At five, Yusuf taped a notice to the door saying the workshop would close at five-thirty that day and that the emergency number would remain available until eight. Then he lowered the shutter at the stated time. Maryam was waiting for them in the car, and Nabil had already left for his worksite. Yusuf picked up Hind's bag before she could object, then gave it back when she said her accommodation was on the third floor and she did not want to return with anything she could not carry herself.

They reached the train station forty minutes early. Maryam sat with Hind near the gate while Yusuf went to buy water. Hind had started work six months before, and he knew the address of her accommodation, the name of her flatmate, and the time her shift began the following morning.

When he returned, Hind said:

—I created an account for the workshop, but I will not manage it from there. I recorded a video showing you how to add jobs and prices.

—And if I make a mistake?

—Correct it. And do not argue with every comment.

—Is that advice for me or for you?

She smiled.

The train was called. She embraced her mother, then stood before her father. He opened his calendar, and together they chose the end of the third week for their next visit. He entered the date in front of her.

—If work changes, I will tell you beforehand, he said.

—So will I.

She passed through the gate and waved once before disappearing down the corridor.

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The following morning, Yusuf raised the shutter at eight. He set Abu Tariq's clock and opened the appointment book to the day's page. Umm Salman was due at nine, and the office measurement at ten-thirty.

A boy stood at the door holding an old lock in a clear plastic bag. He remained outside the threshold and looked first at the customer's chair, then at Yusuf.

Yusuf stepped aside to make room for him.

—Come in.

The End

The Hadith of the Approachable, Gentle, Tender, and Easygoing

‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

“Shall I tell you who is forbidden to the Fire—or upon whom the Fire is forbidden? Every person who is approachable, gentle, tender, and easy to deal with.”¹

1. Recorded by al-Tirmidhi (2488), who called it *hasan gharib*. Al-Albani graded it *sahih li-ghayrihi* in *Sahih al-Targhib wa'l-Tarhib* (2676).