

CHAPTER ONE

🌿 NOURA 🌿

Monday, January 30, 2017

Down . . . down . . . down . . . *Nearly forty thousand feet down . . .* With a gulp, I turned away from the plane's small oval window and yanked down the shade. We were way, *way* up there; traveling in a metal tube, with no net to catch us if we plummeted to the ground.

"Are you all right, *habibti*?" whispered a comforting voice.

"Yes, Baba," I whispered back, careful not to wake my twin brother, Ammar, who sat between us. His handsome face was smooth and carefree in sleep, instead of creased in its usual frown.

"It's exciting, eh?" Baba grinned. "This whole flying thing?"

I shrugged, my mind buzzing with a thousand thoughts and emotions that fought with each other to be heard. *Happiness. Fear. Wonder. Grief.* Usually I would have shared them all, talkative as a magpie, but not today. Not on the

first ever airplane ride of my life, where all the sights and sensations made me feel like I was drowning.

“It’ll be okay, my love,” he said. “We’re here together, safe.”

I nodded, muffling a yawn as I looked into his reassuring soft gray eyes, where hope and comfort lay intertwined. It was true; it was a miracle that we were here. *Together. Safe.* Across the aisle sat Mama, her lips moving silently as her fingers worried a strand of amber prayer beads. Ismail sat curled beside her, sucking his thumb and watching cartoons. The personal television screens were one of a dozen things that had fascinated me the moment we’d boarded. Who knew the seats would be so cushiony, that you got your own tiny table and that the flight attendants gave you all the orange soda you wanted to drink? And they’d brought warm socks for my feet, eye masks for sleeping (though I hadn’t slept even a moment in all the excitement), coloring books and pencils, and hot food in little trays covered in foil. They’d even brought small paper cups of ice cream, my favorite, for dessert!

I stretched, my muscles stiff from six hours of sitting, and propped my head against the tiny pillow. This was the second plane I’d been on; the first, a giant German Airbus, had plucked us from Istanbul Airport and headed west to

Frankfurt. Arriving late, we'd disembarked and hurried through the warren-like halls of the airport. My lavender hijab fluttered behind me until we arrived, breathless, for our connecting flight. As we'd waited to board, Baba had cradled Mama's shoulder, both of them staring out the window as tears flowed down her cheeks. Mama's brother, two sisters, and mother had fled Syria four years prior and found asylum in Berlin, just an hour's flight away. I knew Mama had prayed we'd also end up in Germany, but fate was taking us elsewhere. *Without the chance of visiting our family even once.*

"Noura, wake up," urged a voice beside me. I sat up, disoriented. "What is it?"

"We're landing," Ammar said, with a rare smile. His upturned lips caused the wicked red scar that ran along the right side of his face to pucker.

As the plane's wheels descended, a grating sound rumbled beneath our seats. Ammar reached across me and lifted the window shade with a snap. I pressed my face against the cold glass and could practically feel the wispy clouds caress my cheek as we flew across the glowing blue sky. Startled, I glimpsed a large bird gliding beside us, its pink feathers

glinting in the sun. A bright yellow eye peered at me from an intelligent face, its beak long and shaped like a spoon. A memory tickled my mind, of feeding the caged singing birds in Baba's hotel in Aleppo. Was this what it felt like to be a bird? To escape your cage and have the freedom to travel anywhere, at any time your heart desired?

I looked down, watching the line of blue sky meet the ground. But it wasn't ground I spied. It was inky blue, swirling cerulean, aquamarine and navy . . . *water*. We were flying over water . . . so much water. I dug my fingers into the armrests, startled by the sight. *Focus, Noura*, whispered Dr. Barakat's voice inside my head. I placed my right hand on my stomach and the left on my chest. Slowly, I breathed in through my nose, filling up my lower lungs with air. Then I exhaled, releasing all the air from my mouth.

"What's wrong?" asked Ammar. He leaned over and saw Tampa Bay beneath us. "Water . . ." he said as realization dawned on his worried face. "Do you need to switch seats?"

I shook my head, focused on my breathing. I remembered the beautiful pink bird and let go of the fear. I was flying. Flying over water, and over the terrible memories. *In control. Safe.*

"I'm okay," I said a minute later. "Really."

"Good," said Ammar, the relief in his voice smoothing away his frown.

“What happened?” Baba asked, putting down a magazine he’d been engrossed in.

“Nothing,” I said with a smile. “We’re about to land.”

“Yes,” Baba said, fastening his seat belt. “We have arrived.”

The gruff-voiced immigration officer handed back our passports with an encouraging smile. “Mr. Yusuf Alwan, Mrs. Muna Alwan, Ammar Alwan, Noura Alwan, and Ismail Alwan, welcome to America.”

“Thank you, sir,” Baba said, his voice rough from over two hours of interviews and going over the thick stack of immigration documents. “Thank you so much.”

And with those words, I realized that we’d officially been welcomed to America. *The United States. Florida. Tampa.* Words that had floated around in my head and formed strange sounds in my mouth the moment I’d heard them four months ago. I’d been sitting next to the window in Ms. Pamuk’s class when I’d seen Baba race past, waving an envelope in the air, sending up puffs of dust with every pounding footstep till he’d disappeared around the corner.

I hadn’t paid attention during the rest of class, instead counting the minutes till Ammar and I could run home to our family’s container, identical to the thousands of others, in Kilis, the Turkish refugee camp. We’d found our

parents sitting against the cushions in the front room, lost in thought.

What happened? I'd burst out, while Ammar stood, silent as usual, stoically by. Baba jumped up, as if he still couldn't believe it himself, to tell us we'd been granted asylum. *In America*. He and Ammar had joyfully hugged while Mama tried to smile, disappointment lurking at the corners of her mouth. I realized that she'd hoped we'd be going to Germany. Wondering whether to be happy or sad, I'd crawled into her lap, wishing the letter had brought her only joy.

Past the immigration booths, I followed Baba toward baggage claim, but I knew no suitcases waited for us. We'd arrived carrying the small handbags that held all the possessions we had in the world: a few pairs of clothes and the mementos we'd been able to snatch before leaving Aleppo. Gone were Mama's collection of poetry books, Baba's fancy suits that he wore to work, Ammar's art supplies, and my collection of bird figurines and trinkets. Except for one, a delicate peacock brooch hidden in my pocket.

"What do we do now?" asked Mama, exhaustion lining her pale, delicate face.

"They told us to go to the receiving area after immigration.

Someone is supposed to meet us there,” said Baba with a hopeful smile.

We followed the other passengers out a set of double doors into a wide hall where dozens of people stood, waiting to collect relatives or friends. I skimmed the sea of faces, not wanting to make direct eye contact with anyone.

“There,” said Ammar, grabbing Baba’s arm. He pointed toward a sign in the distance, bobbing up and down.

It read, WELCOME, ALWAN FAMILY. A stocky man with a shock of white hair held the sign, a warm smile lighting his tanned, leathery face. He was with a small group of people, one a tall, willowy woman wearing a long skirt, jean jacket, and turquoise hijab. When we stopped in front of them, they stood for a moment, looking at each other uncertainly.

“*Salaam Alaikum*,” exclaimed the woman in hijab. “Are you Yusuf Alwan?”

“*Walaikum Salaam*,” said Baba. “Yes, I am him.”

“Welcome,” said the woman in Arabic, her hazel eyes warm. “My name is Amani Sofian. I’m here to help translate if you need it.”

“*Shukran*, thank you,” said Baba. “My older children and I speak English fairly well, but my wife and youngest son are still learning.”

Amani smiled and reached for Mama's hand as the others crowded around. I inched away, feeling unsettled. Near the exit doors, I could hear a low rumbling noise, like engines revving.

"Hello," said the stocky man, turning to me with a grin. "You're Noura, right?"

I gave him a shaky nod.

"My name is Bob, Bob Sanchez. I'm here to take you to your new home. How was your flight?"

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry as I tried to dredge up the English words from school and the shows we'd watched on the internet. "Hello, Mr. Bob. It was . . . good. Thank you."

"Let's get going," said Amani, exchanging a worried look with Bob. "We have a short drive, but there's been . . . a bit of trouble."

"Trouble?" said Baba, a look of concern crossing his face. "What kind of trouble?"

"Nothing that directly affects you," Bob said. "We can talk more about it once we get you settled in your apartment."

Baba nodded and we turned to follow Amani toward the exit. As we reached the doors, the rumble of engines increased. But it wasn't cars I saw, it was a crowd of people

standing outside. The noise was coming from them . . . shouting, yelling, and chanting.

What's going on? I thought, inching closer to Ammar as we slipped through the doors. Dozens of people congregated outside, chanting and carrying signs I couldn't understand. One read, KEEP YOUR ORANGE HANDS OFF OUR CONSTITUTION! and another, NO BAN, NO WALL.

"Baba, what is happening?" I asked.

Before he could answer me, a harried young man in a dark suit pressed his business card into Amani's hand. "I'm a lawyer. Did they have trouble getting through immigration?"

"No." She shook her head. "They were lucky."

"Call us if there are problems," he said. "Lots of refugees are stranded in airports all across the country."

"Why would we have problems?" I asked Ammar, feeling my stomach churn.

"They don't want us here," he growled.

Don't want us here? But we'd traveled thousands of miles to be here. If they didn't want us, where would we go? Back home? Memories clashed in my mind . . . of buildings reduced to rubble, the boom of explosions, wailing sirens, children crying. *We can't go back there!* A sharp pain snapped me back from the past as I pinched the soft skin near my wrist.

A girl with bright blue hair approached with a smile, carrying a yellow sign: IMMIGRANTS MAKE AMERICA GREAT! The boy beside her carried another one: WE ARE ALL MUSLIMS NOW.

I rubbed away the lingering sting and grabbed Baba's hand.
What was going on?