

AS LONG AS THE
LEMON
TREES
GROW

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*To Hayao Miyazaki, who founded my imagination
To Ali Al-Tantawi, who revolutionized my imagination
And to all the Syrians who loved, lost, lived and died for Syria
We will come back home one day*

كُلُّ لَيْمُونَةٍ سَتُجِبُّ طِفْلاً وَمُحَالٌّ أَنْ يَنْتَهِيَ الْلَيْمُونُ
نِزَار قَبَّانِي

‘Every lemon will bring forth a child, and the
lemons will never die out’

Nizar Qabbani

Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	15
Chapter 3	28
Chapter 4	39
Chapter 5	52
Chapter 6	59
Chapter 7	73
Chapter 8	83
Chapter 9	97
Chapter 10	114
Chapter 11	120
Chapter 12	131
Chapter 13	138
Chapter 14	147
Chapter 15	161
Chapter 16	178
Chapter 17	193
Chapter 18	209

Chapter 19	223
Chapter 20	232
Chapter 21	238
Chapter 22	250
Chapter 23	255
Chapter 24	265
Chapter 25	271
Chapter 26	282
Chapter 27	289
Chapter 28	297
Chapter 29	306
Chapter 30	312
Chapter 31	320
Chapter 32	327
Chapter 33	334
Chapter 34	339
Chapter 35	351
Chapter 36	369
Chapter 37	383
Chapter 38	388
Chapter 39	399
Epilogue	408
Author's Note	417
Acknowledgements	421



Three shrivelled lemons and a plastic bag of pita bread that's more dry than mouldy sit next to one another.

That's all this supermarket has to offer.

I stare with tired eyes before picking them up, my bones aching with every movement. I stroll around the dusty, empty aisles once more, hoping maybe I missed something. But all I'm met with is a strong sense of nostalgia. The days when my brother and I would rush into this supermarket after school and fill our arms with bags of crisps and gummy bears. This makes me think of Mama and the way she would shake her head, smiling at her red-faced, starry-eyed children trying their best to hide the spoils of war in their backpacks. She'd brush our hair—

I shake my head.

Stop.

When the aisles prove to be truly empty, I trudge to the counter to pay for the lemons and bread with Baba's savings.

From whatever he was able to withdraw before that fateful day. The owner, a bald old man in his sixties, gives me a sympathetic smile before returning my change.

Outside the supermarket, a desolate picture greets me. I don't recoil, used to the horror, but it amplifies the anguish in my heart.

Cracked road, the asphalt reduced to rubble. Grey buildings hollowed and decaying as the elements try to finish what the military's bombs started. Utter and absolute destruction.

The sun has been slowly melting away the remains of winter, but the cold is still here. Spring, the symbol of new life, does not extend to worn-out Syria. Least of all my city, Homs. Misery reigns strong in the dead, heavy branches and rubble, thwarted only by the hope in people's hearts.

The sun hangs low in the sky, beginning the process of bidding us farewell, the colours slowly changing from orange to a heavy blue.

I murmur, 'Daisies. Daisies. Daisies. Sweet-smelling daisies.'

Several men stand outside the supermarket, their faces gaunt and marked with malnourishment but their eyes sparkling with light. When I pass by, I hear bits of their conversation, but I don't linger. I know what they're talking about. It's what everyone has been talking about for the past nine months.

I walk quickly, not wanting to listen. I know that the military siege inflicted on us is a death sentence. That our food supplies are diminishing and we're starving. I know the hospital is about to reach a point any day now at which medications will become a myth. I know this because I

performed surgeries without anaesthesia today: People are dying from haemorrhages and infections and there's no way for me to help them. And I know we'll all succumb to a fate worse than death if the Free Syrian Army isn't able to stop the military's advances on Old Homs.

As I head home, the breeze turns cold and I pull my hijab tight around my neck. I'm acutely aware of the dried spots of blood that have managed to creep under my lab coat's sleeves. For every life I can't save during my shift, one more drop of blood becomes a part of me. No matter how many times I wash my hands, our martyrs' blood seeps beneath my skin, into my cells. By now it's probably encoded in my DNA.

And today, the echo of the oscillating saw from the amputation Dr Ziad made me stand in for is stuck in my mind on a loop.

For seventeen years, Homs raised me and cultivated my dreams: Graduate from university with a high GPA, secure a great position at the Zaytouna Hospital as their pharmacist, and finally be able to travel outside of Syria and see the world.

But only one of those dreams has come true. And not in the way I thought it would.

A year ago, after the Arab Spring sparked across the region, Syria grabbed the hope awakening in the masses and called for freedom. The dictatorship responded by unleashing hell.

With the military deliberately targeting doctors, they became as scarce as laughter. But even without doctors, the bombs didn't stop, and with the Zaytouna Hospital standing

on its last legs, they needed every helping hand they could get. Even the custodial staff were promoted to nurses. Having spent one year at pharmacy school, I was the equivalent of a seasoned doctor, and after their last pharmacist was buried under the rubble of his home, there was no other choice.

It didn't matter that I was eighteen years old. It didn't matter that my medical experience was confined to the words in my textbooks. All of that was remedied as the first body was laid out before me to be stitched up. Death is an excellent teacher.

In the last six months, I have participated in more surgeries than I can count and closed more eyes than I ever thought I would.

This *wasn't* supposed to be my life.

The rest of the way back home reminds me of the black-and-white pictures my history textbooks showed of Germany and London after the Second World War. Flattened homes spilling their interior wood and concrete like a perforated intestine. The smell of trees burned to ash.

The cold air bites through my lab coat's worn-out material, and the harsh touch of it makes me shiver. I murmur, 'Feverfew. It looks like daisies. Treats fevers and arthritis. Feverfew. Feverfew. Feverfew.'

I finally catch sight of my home and my chest expands. It's not the one I once shared with my family; it's the one Layla gave me after a bomb fell on my own. Without her, I'd be out on the streets.

Layla's place – our place, I guess – is a one-storey house

stacked right beside others just like it. All of them bearing bullet holes that decorate the walls like deadly art. All of them quiet, sad and lonely. Our neighbourhood is one of the last where homes are still mostly intact. In the other neighbourhoods people sleep under broken roofs or on the streets.

The lock is rusty and creaks when I twist the key and call out, 'I'm home!'

'In here!' Layla calls back.

We came into this world together when our mothers shared the same hospital room. She's my best friend, my rock and – because she fell in love with my brother, Hamza – my sister-in-law.

And now, with everything that's happened, my responsibility and the only family I have left in the world.

When Layla first saw this house, she was immediately infatuated with its quaint aesthetic, so Hamza bought it for her on the spot. Two bedrooms were perfect for a newlywed couple to make their own. She painted branches of green vines from the bottom of one of the walls all the way to the top, etched purple lavender blossoms on another, and covered the floors in thick Arabian rugs I had helped her buy from Souq Al-Hamidiyah. She painted the kitchen white to contrast with shelves made from walnut wood, which she filled with different assortments of mugs she designed. The kitchen overlooks the living room, where, back in the day, her art supplies cluttered every nook and cranny. Papers smudged by her coloured fingertips strewn across the floor, paint from her paintbox dripping from brushes. Many times

I would come over only to find her sprawled under her easel, auburn hair fanned out and staring at the ceiling, mouthing lyrics to a popular old Arabic song.

The house was the embodiment of Layla's soul.

But it's not that any more. Layla's home has lost its spark, the colours completely faded, leaving a sunken grey shade in their wake. It's a husk of a home.

I make my way to the kitchen to find her lying back on the daisy-printed couch in the living room and put the bag of pita bread on the counter. As soon as I see her, my exhaustion disappears. 'I'm heating up the soup. Do you want some?'

'No, I'm good,' she answers. Her voice, unlike mine, is strong with the promise of life. It's a warm blanket cocooning me in sweet memories. 'How did the boat thing go?'

Crap. I pretend to busy myself with pouring the watered-down lentil soup into the saucepan and lighting the ignition needle on the portable gas stove. 'You sure you don't want some?'

Layla sits up, her seven-months-pregnant belly stretching over the navy-blue dress she's wearing. 'Tell me how it went, Salama.'

I glue my eyes to the brown soup, listening to the hissing flames. Since not long after I moved in, Layla has been nagging me to talk to Am at the hospital. She's heard the stories of Syrians finding safety in Germany. So have I. Some of my own patients have been able to secure passage across the Mediterranean Sea via Am. How he finds the boats, I have no idea. But with money, anything is possible.

'Salama.'

I sigh, sticking a finger in the soup and finding it just about warm. But my poor stomach rumbles, not caring if it's truly hot, so I remove it from the stove and sit beside her on the couch.

Layla looks at me patiently, her eyebrows still raised. Her ocean-blue eyes are impossibly huge, nearly taking over her face. She's always looked like autumn incarnate with her golden-red palette of auburn hair, scattered freckles and pale complexion. Even now, with all the pain, she still looks magical. But I see the way her elbows stick out oddly and how her once-full cheeks have narrowed.

'I didn't ask him,' I finally say, eating a spoonful of soup and bracing myself for her groan.

And she delivers. 'Why? We have some money—'

'Yeah, money we need to survive when we get there. We don't know how much he'll ask for, and besides, the stories ...'

She shakes her head, strands of hair falling over her cheek. 'OK, yes. Some people aren't ... reaching land, but there are more who are! Salama, we *need* to make a decision. We need to leave! You know, before I start breastfeeding.'

She isn't finished, her breaths becoming laboured. 'And don't you *dare* suggest I go without you! Either you and I get on a boat together or neither of us does. I *won't* be in God knows where, scared out of my mind and alone, not knowing if you're dead or alive. There's no way in *hell* that's happening! And we can't walk to Turkey – you told me that yourself.'

She points at her swollen stomach. 'Not to mention, with border guards and snipers scattered all over like ants, we'd be shot as soon as we stepped out of the Free Syrian Army's area. We have *one* option. How many times do I have to repeat this?'

I cough. The soup slides thickly down my throat, landing like stones in my stomach. She's right. She's in her third trimester; neither she nor I can walk four hundred miles dodging death the whole way.

I set the saucepan on the pine coffee table in front of us and stare at my hands. The criss-cross slashes of scars covering them are the marks death left when he tried to take my life. Some are faint, silvery, while a few are more ragged, the new flesh still looking raw despite the fact they've healed. They're a reminder to work faster, to push through the exhaustion and save one more life.

I move to pull my sleeves over them, but Layla's hand covers one of mine gently and I look up at her. 'I know why you're not asking him, and it's not the money.'

My hand twitches under hers.

Hamza's voice whispers in my mind, tinged with worry. *Salama, promise me. Promise.*

I shake my head, trying to dissolve his voice, and take a deep breath. 'Layla, I'm the only pharmacist left in three neighbourhoods. If I leave, who will help them? The crying children. The sniper victims. The wounded men.'

She clutches her dress tightly. 'I know. But I'm *not* sacrificing you.'

I open my mouth to say something but stop when she winces, squeezing her eyes shut.

‘Is the baby kicking?’ I immediately ask, inching closer. Even though I try not to let the worry escape, it does. With the siege, prenatal vitamins are scarce and check-ups are limited.

‘A bit,’ she admits.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No. Just uncomfortable.’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

She shakes her head. ‘I’m fine.’

‘OK, I can hear you lying a mile away. Turn around,’ I say, and she laughs before doing so.

I work through the stress knots in her shoulders until I feel the tension draining away from her. She’s barely got any fat under her skin, and every time my fingers connect with her acromion and scapula, I shudder. This ... this is wrong. She *shouldn’t* be here.

‘You can stop now,’ Layla says after a few minutes. She flashes me a grateful smile. ‘Thank you.’

I try to return it. ‘It’s the pharmacist in me, you know. The need to take care of you is in my bones.’

‘I know.’

I bend down and put my hands on her stomach, feeling the baby push back a bit.

‘I love you, baby, but you have to stop hurting your mama. She needs to sleep,’ I coo.

Layla’s smile deepens and she pats my cheek. ‘You’re too adorable for your own good, Salama. One of these

days someone will snatch you up and take you far away from me.'

'Marriage? In this economy?' I say and snort, thinking of the last time Mama told me we were having an auntie and her son over for coffee. Funnily enough, they never made it. The uprising happened that same day. But I remember being giddy about that visit. At the prospect of falling in love. Looking back now, it feels as if I'm watching a different girl, one who wears my face and speaks with my voice.

Layla's brows furrow. 'It could happen. Don't be so pessimistic.'

I laugh at her affronted expression. 'Whatever you want.'

That part of Layla hasn't changed. Back then, when I called her to tell her about the visit, she was at my doorstep within fifteen minutes, sporting a huge bag filled with clothes and make-up and squealing her head off.

'You're wearing this!' she had announced after pulling me to my room, rolling out her azure-blue kaftan. It was a rich fabric that glided smoothly over my arms. The hemline was stitched in gold, as was the belt at the waist, where it flowed from the sides like a waterfall. The colour reminded me of the sea made from rain in Spirited Away. Magical, that is.

'Pair that up with a blue eyeliner, and you'll have him begging you to see him again.' She winked and I chuckled. *'You look absolutely gorgeous in blue eyeliner!'*

'Oh, I know that.' I waggled my eyebrows. *'Perks of being brown.'*

'Whereas I look like a bruised corpse!' She wiped imaginary

tears from her eyes, her wedding ring sparkling.

'Stop being dramatic, Layla.' I laughed.

Her smile turned devilish, her blue eyes glinting. 'You're right. Hamza likes it. A lot.'

I immediately clamped my hands over my ears. 'Ew, no! I don't need to know anything about that.'

Guffawing, she pulled at my arms, trying to make me more uncomfortable, but she couldn't string two words together coherently. Not with my mortified expression making her fall into a fit of giggles.

The sound of Layla sighing snaps me out of my daydream.

'Life is more than just survival, Salama,' she says.

'I know that,' I reply. Our teasing mood has vanished.

She gives me a pointed look. 'Do you really? Because I see the way you act. You're just focusing on the hospital, on working, on me. But you're not *actually* living. You're not thinking about why this revolution is happening. It's as if you don't *want* to think about it at all.' She pauses, holding my stare, and my mouth dries. 'It's as if you don't care, Salama. But I know you do. You know this revolution is about getting our lives back. It's not about survival. It's about us fighting. If you can't fight here, you won't anywhere else. Not even if you changed your mind and we made it to Germany.'

I stand and gesture at the forlorn, peeling paint on the walls. At *nothing*. 'Fight *what*? We'll be lucky if the worst that happens to us here is death, and you know that. Either we'll get arrested by the military or a bomb will kill us. There's nothing to fight for because we *can't* fight. No one's helping

us! I volunteer at the hospital because I can't *stand* seeing people die. But that's *it*.'

Layla looks at me, but there's no annoyance in her eyes. Only compassion. 'We fight while we're still here, Salama, because this is our country. This is the land of your father, and his father before him. Your history is embedded in this soil. No country in the world will love you as yours does.'

Tears sting my eyes. Her words echo from the history books we read at school. Love for our country is in our bone marrow. It's in our national anthem, which we sang every morning from our first day in school. The words were just words then. But now, after all of this, they have become our reality.

Our spirits are defiant, and our history is glorious.

And our martyrs' souls are formidable guardians.

I avoid Layla's gaze. I don't want a guilt trip. I've had enough of that already.

'I've lost enough in this war,' I say bitterly.

Her voice is firm. 'It's not a war, Salama. It's a revolution.'

'Whatever.'

And with that, I walk back to my bedroom, closing the door behind me so I can breathe. All I care about – all I have left in the world – is Layla and the hospital. I'm not a monster. There are people suffering and I *can* help. It's the reason I wanted to be a pharmacist. But I refuse to think about *why* they end up in the hospital. Why all of this is happening. The *why* took away Mama. I remember her fingers cold against mine. It took Baba and Hamza to God knows where. I don't

want to dwell on the past. I don't want to cry about how I'm going to end my teen years with nothing more than lost hope and nightmare-filled sleep. I want to survive.

I want my family. I just want my family back.

Even if what Layla says is the truth.

I change into the only pyjamas I have left. A black cotton sweater and bottoms. Decent enough if I ever need to make an escape into the night. In the bathroom, I ignore my wasted reflection and dry brown hair falling past my shoulders and open the water tap out of habit. Nothing. The neighbourhood hasn't had water or electricity in weeks. It used to come in bursts but has stopped altogether with the siege. Luckily it rained last week, so Layla and I put out buckets to collect the water. I use a small handful for ablution and pray.

The sun's feeble rays have vanished from my room's scratched floorboards, and the dark cloak of the night takes over Homs. My teeth chatter for a bit with anticipation before I clamp my lips shut, swallowing thickly. Whatever control I exude during the day falters when the sun sets.

I sit on my bed, close my eyes and take deep breaths. I need to clear my mind. I need to focus on something other than the fear and pain that have taken root in my soul.

'Sweet alyssum. Sweet as their name,' I murmur, praying for my nerves not to fail me. 'White petals. Used for pain relief. Also for colds, abdominal cramps and coughs. Sweet. *Sweet.*'

It works. My lungs begin distributing the oxygen evenly to my blood. I open my eyes and watch the thicket of grey

clouds outside my window. The glass is chipped at the sides from when Layla's home took the impact of a nearby bomb, and the frame is splintered. When I moved in, I had to wash blood from the pane.

Despite the window being locked, a chill sweeps the room, and I shiver, knowing what's about to happen. The horror I see isn't just confined to the hospital. My terror has mutated in my mind, bestowed with a life and a voice that never fails to show up each night.

'How long are you going to sit there without talking to me?' The deep voice comes from beside the window sill, sending gooseflesh all over my neck.

His voice reminds me of the freezing water I splash over myself when I come home drenched in the martyrs' blood. It's stones weighing on my chest, sinking me to the earth below. It's heavy as a humid day and deafening as the bombs the military throws on us. It's what our hospital is built on, and the wordless sounds we make.

I turn towards him slowly. 'What do you want now?'

Khawf looks at me. His suit is crisp and clean. It troubles me, though, the specks of red lining his shoulders. They've been there since we met, and I still haven't got used to them. But I don't like looking at his eyes either – icy blue. With his midnight-black hair, he doesn't look human, which I suppose is the point. He looks as close to human as he can try to be.

'You know what I want,' his voice ripples, and I shiver.