

Bitter
&
Sweet

AMAL AWAD



PANTERA
PRESS

I

It was one of those uphill dreams: a road so steep, it was vertical. Zeina was in the driver's seat, in a little red car that did not belong to her. She had to keep moving or she would lose momentum and fall. She tried to accelerate, but the car jolted and spluttered, struggling to gain thrust.

When she awoke in fright, Zeina counselled herself not to be superstitious about it. But hours later, as she stood in the flooded kitchen of her father's restaurant, the dream became a sign; an unnerving, crushing confirmation that she had a momentous task ahead of her.

She could no longer deny that her father's restaurant was falling apart – and she was taking it very personally. Every crack in the painted walls, every squeak of the floorboards, every minor issue that threatened to become major signalled a gloriously expensive refurbishment. Efforts that should have been made years ago, but Zeina's father, Nasser, had refused even to dispose of the broken neon sign above the front window. By the end of its time, it had simply lit up as 'Casa lanca'. They had long ago stopped switching it on. It frustrated Zeina. Such an easy fix. But whenever she had asked Nasser to repair it, he would ignore her, quick to switch gears and talk about the next-door neighbour's garbage bins sitting too close to the entrance of the restaurant.

It was four thirty in the afternoon, and service was scheduled to begin in an hour and a half. But instead of prepping, everyone's attention was on the flood. A torrent of water from a busted pipe, which Zeina and Amir, Nasser's only employed cook, had managed to stem. The damage was clear: a small lake in the kitchen that meant every step was followed by a gentle splash. Zeina hadn't yet assessed the impact on the equipment – as outdated as Casa lanca – but the containers and boxes of produce for the next few days were not spoiled.

Amir switched up two large buckets, the overflow sloshing the water back onto the tiles. He cursed profusely in Arabic as he stepped out of the way, cursing the plumbing's entire timeline. His movements were more elegant than his appearance: stained singlet and jeans, and a ponytail that kept his hair neat but couldn't hide the frizz caused by the damp.

'Elena called a plumber,' Zeina said. She was tense, her every movement tight as she tried to flatten the anxiety charging through her like wildfire.

There was an engagement tonight, for Lena, the younger sister of Zeina's best friend, Noor. Family friends since the first days of migration. The food was ready – two generously loaded trays of mansaf – but Zeina needed to deliver it before the party began.

'I turned off the main,' Amir said, wiping his forehead with his arm. He looked spent as he scanned Zeina, bucket in hand. 'You're going to ruin your dress.'

Zeina looked down. It was vintage, from the 1960s, long-waisted in a stiff, faded gold brocade. It was in better condition than the floorboards.

'Let me help you,' Zeina said.

'Forget it. We have done enough. Now we wait for the plumber.'

'We have to get the food to Noor's.'

'I'll help you. Elena can stay back.'

Amir called out to her and a few seconds later Elena appeared. Her brow was furrowed, her hands gripping her phone. As Zeina

attempted to mop up a small lake of water around the industrial fridge, Elena approached her.

‘Mierda,’ Elena said. ‘Look at this mess. Go on to the party, I’ll stay here.’

‘We can’t open like this.’

Amir shrugged. ‘We don’t open, then.’

Zeina wanted to object, but the wet tiles glistening beneath her feet stopped her.

‘Your father never listened to me,’ Elena said. ‘We told him too many times to fix this place up or sell it. But he doesn’t listen.’

‘A man who doesn’t listen. Never heard such a thing,’ murmured Zeina.

Amir responded with a heavy grunt of disapproval, but out of Elena’s mouth flowed a sequence of profanities in Spanish. Zeina mostly understood her. She winced as the mop splattered against the tiles, her stomach weighed down by a lead balloon of anxiety because she was certain – quite bloody sure – that this was the opening number in what was going to be a series of disasters. She might have woken up from the uphill dream, but there was no way that little red car made it to the top.

‘You saw the article, Zeina?’ said Elena, aggrieved.

‘Faye the famous,’ snorted Amir.

‘I never liked her,’ said Elena, slipping on her reading glasses.

‘Yes, Elena, we know.’

‘So what?’ said Amir. ‘She opens some café and makes zaatar croissants.’

Elena read slowly off her phone screen, the blue rays lighting up her face. ‘*When I was a little girl, instead of playing with friends, I would retreat to the kitchen to cook with my mother. Everyone teased me about it. I got called a snob for not spending more time with kids my age.*’ Elena paused, taking a moment to check in with Zeina. When she got no response, Elena continued. ‘*Flavours were my fun place. I always felt like I was home when I was in the kitchen.*’

It stung to have Zeina's words, her history with her father, recited back to her from her cousin's mouth.

'Elena, please. I've read it. We have more important things to worry about now.'

Elena shook her head, her face twisted in disgust. 'It's easy to tell a lie to others. But she can't lie to herself. You will see, mi amor. The truth always comes out.'

Another grunt in the distance from Amir, who trained his gaze on Elena. 'Bullshit,' he said, his lips curled up in amusement. 'Maybe the bad guy doesn't win, but he's done some damage.'

Zeina bit her tongue. She had twice read the article about her cousin Faye in a prominent weekend paper, in which she shared her lifelong dream of running her own restaurant. With every revelation from Faye and her invented history, Zeina was a teenager again, isolated from her extended family, befriended only by a loyal Noor and her school friends. The 'Surry Snob', Zeina's cousins would call her – Faye included.

'Helou,' said Amir. 'Yallah. We all remember our stories differently.'

'I never liked her, mi cielo,' Elena repeated. 'You're wearing your mother's dress again? Oh, Zeina.'

Amir lifted a bucket filled to the brim and carefully transported it to the door. 'Faye should just write. She tells nice stories. What did she call her little café again?'

'Nablus. And it's not a café, it's a restaurant. The home bakery is Falastin by Faye.'

'Is she planning to occupy all of Palestine with her projects?'

Elena tugged at Zeina's dress, inspecting the fabric, her features etched in disapproval. 'I'm surprised she didn't steal Amir.'

'She tried.'

Zeina, moving away from Elena, glanced over at Amir in surprise. Faye had asked Zeina to cook for her. But as she was already well placed at an upmarket restaurant, Zeina had let the insult slide with a polite rejection. But Amir, too? Before she

could respond, her father arrived on the scene in an ill-fitting robe that revealed a stained undershirt and baggy thermal tights.

‘What happened?’ came Nasser’s strained voice in English.

‘Dad, what are you doing here?’ Zeina took in her father’s distended stomach. ‘You should be resting.’

‘Enough with the resting,’ Nasser said.

Elena’s eyes grew wide as she stepped in front of Nasser. ‘Listen to your daughter. Do you want to get worse?’

Nasser tried to prise the mop off Zeina, and she could smell the tobacco. Up close, she was able to assess his condition more clearly. His skin was clammy and pale, his exhalations short and sharp. Her worries congregated and amplified.

While Amir detached Nasser’s fingers from the handle, Zeina took the opportunity to ferret around in her father’s pockets. She dug out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter.

‘Really, Dad?’

‘I didn’t smoke anything, it was there before. Give them back to me.’

‘A’mou, come with me,’ said Amir. He threaded his arm through Nasser’s and slowly turned him towards the door.

‘Call the plumber,’ Nasser said. Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be led out of the disaster zone, his movements awkward, like a skier stuck in the snow.

‘We are not stupid,’ said Elena and Nasser half-heartedly waved the insult away.

Elena, from her Spanish restaurant two doors down. Elena, who had filled the maternal energy gap in Zeina’s youth, an abyss her mother’s absence had created when she left Nasser thirty-eight years ago. It was Elena who had helped Nasser raise Zeina when it was challenging for a single man in his thirties – Zeina’s first period, Zeina’s first bra, and a sex talk Zeina was certain Nasser had never signed off on. It was Elena who had taught Zeina about foreplay and UTIs. ‘It’s not romantic, but make sure you take a piss afterwards, mi niña.’ And it was Elena

now, once again, trying to prevent the train from careening off the tracks.

Zeina watched Amir usher Nasser away, leaning into Elena when she wrapped an arm around her.

‘He has surgery then a day later he thinks it’s back to business,’ scoffed Elena.

‘I can’t leave him.’ Zeina throbbled with guilt.

‘You’re going. I’ll stay with him. Don’t worry.’

It may have been the restaurant falling apart around Zeina, but she could not dismiss the thought that Nasser *was* Casablanca. It was too obvious a metaphor. Yet as she continued to mop, every splat jolted her back into her uphill dream. The road ahead, she knew, was not smooth or straight. It was vertiginous and she had no choice but to continue upwards.



Nasser’s car was parked in the small laneway behind the restaurant. Beside it rested Zeina’s beloved Suzuki Katana motorcycle, protected from a light spattering of rain beneath a faded awning. Zeina wished briefly that she was on it, riding fast down a clear road with generous curves.

‘This isn’t the renovation you planned,’ Amir said, as they ferried two large silver trays of mansaf to the boot of the car.

‘I didn’t plan anything,’ she told Amir.

They packed them in, carefully arranging the items so that there were no gaps. The scent of the mansaf hit Zeina’s nose and her stomach immediately responded. The salty, sour jameed, a goat’s milk dried yoghurt; the lamb infused with allspice. It took hours of work to prepare mansaf, which wasn’t easy given Zeina spent most nights at Salud, a restaurant that certainly did not face the structural challenges of Casablanca.

‘You are being a good daughter.’

Zeina slammed the boot closed. ‘Hardly.’

There were more items to load into the car. They used the floor between the front and back seats and used boxes to Tetris in large containers of hummus, baba ghannouj, fried kibbeh and felafel. Zeina piled in a dozen bags of flatbread.

‘Is this an engagement or are we going to war and feeding the army?’

As they dropped into the front seats, Zeina scanned a dishevelled Amir. He had a trail of scars on his forearms that he would not talk about, but which were on full display.

‘You have to change,’ she told him.

‘You’re joking.’

‘Noor’s mother can’t see you like that.’

Amir took a beat, then sighed and exited the car. He slammed the door and Zeina exhaled, processing the delay. Amir trudged his way up the wooden stairs to the room above the restaurant. Nasser’s never-ending queue of imports from Jordan and Palestine, ready to take up work as a cook. Zeina was surprised that the students who had once rented that little room even had time to study between multiple jobs.

She couldn’t remember when Amir had arrived; was it two years ago or three? Now Amir, like Elena, was embedded in Casablanca’s creaky floorboards and naff, aged wall paintings of Jerusalem and Beirut.

So Faye had attempted to poach Amir. The article was not the first piece of gushing coverage Faye had received for her eatery, but this one was significantly high profile. A major newspaper’s weekend edition with a photo shoot. She brought it up on her phone. There was Faye, her blonde-dyed hair styled to look beach-wave casual. She looked eastern suburbs, her camel-coloured clothing chic. She was aspirational: a thirty-something wunderkind.

Elena had taken Faye’s falsehoods more personally than Zeina. That was because Zeina didn’t consider herself to be in competition with Faye. She wanted to upskill and succeed as a

chef. Faye, however, wanted to run her own business, sell her own spices and have a cookbook. Faye wanted to be a personality. And she was taking her husband and kids on the celebrity ride with her. A second photo showed Faye mid-laugh, standing in her kitchen surrounded by ingredients. Beside her was her adoring husband, who joked in the article about being ‘Mr Faye Jarrar’.

‘Yes, motherhood and running a business are hard but worth it’, Faye had told the magazine. This did make Zeina smile because Faye was not a wonder woman; she was well supported and had admitted to Zeina the drudgery of motherhood on more than one occasion.

Zeina did not hold this against Faye. What irked her was the pretence, the constructed persona; the betrayal baked into it all because while Faye had talent in the kitchen, she was more Aussie than Arab. She had flirted with but never committed to her Arab heritage or her Islamic religion. She ‘wouldn’t be caught dead’ at community events when they were growing up, but she went through a religious phase. When she began to work, she was known as Faye Jarrod. She did as she pleased, mindful never to misbehave in places that could expose her misdeeds. Ultimately, despite a brief attachment to a Palestinian, rather than marry someone her parents approved of, she had married an Italian-Australian man, whose family owned a renowned bakery. She never seemed interested in owning a restaurant. Yet, here she was, folding herself into this Arabness for the media, to draw in business at the same time as she claimed it cost her to do so.

‘I was told not to say my food is Palestinian, but I refuse. My food is a celebration of who I am and where I come from.’

Noor called it ‘Fayekness’ – an understatement. How she used to turn her nose up at the Arabic food served at weekend family events. Yes. That Zeina did take a little personally.

Ten minutes later, Amir emerged in tailored black pants and a white, short-sleeved button-up shirt, and Zeina quickly hid the story. When he dropped into the seat beside her, the evidence of

a fresh shower came with him – a cool and soapy aroma, with a hint of aftershave. The annoyed look remained, but at least he had cleaned himself up.

‘Thank you,’ Zeina said, switching on the ignition.

He shrugged. ‘Do I look like a waiter now?’

‘Well, you don’t look like you’ve just come out of a swamp.’

‘I did just come out of a swamp. Your dad has serious problems. I don’t know how he lives like that.’

Zeina did not ask him to elaborate. She reversed out slowly, chewing on her bottom lip as she positioned the car in the bus lane. Then she clicked on the indicator and waited for a wave of traffic to pass.

‘I think it’s a bad sign,’ Zeina said. ‘The flood.’

‘Yeah. It’s a sign that Nasser is cheap, so he let it fall apart. Now you have to fix it.’

Zeina glanced to her left, where Amir was scrolling on his phone. ‘Is my father in trouble?’

Amir was silent, his eyes still on the phone. Eventually, he looked up. ‘Your dad pays me on time every week, so it can’t be that bad.’

When they were stopped at a red light, Zeina turned to Amir once more. ‘Did she really try to steal you?’

‘Ya’ani. In the Faye way. Danced around it like a ballerina.’

‘She was sneaky, you mean?’

Amir shrugged. ‘Saying lots of compliments about your dad but making it sound like he was running a McDonald’s. It doesn’t matter. A’mou gave me this job when I had nothing. I’m not going anywhere.’

In a stomach-twisting moment, she understood: she wasn’t going anywhere either.

2

It was an inflated congregation. A confusion of colours, music so loud it pierced the eardrums, dancing so enthusiastic there could be casualties. There was too much food, of course, and an abundance of alcohol in Noor's impressive family home.

Zeina surveyed the room from the hallway door. Noor's sister Lena confidently held the centre of a circle of clapping guests, her bejewelled hands and wrists peeking out above the heads.

There was too much satin. Too many ill-fitting dresses; some revealed too much, others not enough. Zeina tugged at her own dress, which had maintained its golden hue but had lost its depth and shine. There were scratches in the fabric, errant strands of thread sticking out. It was not really fit for purpose, but Zeina was living out of a suitcase.

She tried to remember what it was like to be Lena's age. To be in the throes of that time of possibility where nothing was yet settled, where you were still on your way to some place of completion. When you still unapologetically subscribed to the notion of finding The One, and with him, a sense of wholeness.

Her father's restaurant woes occupied her thoughts, but as Zeina took in the explosive joy around her, she returned to the surface. It was not a busted pipe or Faye's restaurant alone that eroded her calm. It was Ray. Ray Badri, who had grown into

a life of greater potential than anyone had expected. Ray, her estranged husband. Ray, who was nowhere to be seen.

They hadn't spoken in two-and-a-half months. A years-long relationship and bond extinguished. From everything to nothing. Just like that.

Everyone had seemed so confused that Zeina and Ray had parted. Zeina's father had seemed the most startled. 'Ray is a good man. Don't be stupid. Weren't you the one who wanted him?' Noor had been speechless, heartbroken. Her extended family, pitying, but then, Ray was younger than Zeina, so the end of their marriage had served as a confirmation to the doubters.

As Zeina watched the thrilling way the party guests smashed into each other to the frenzied sounds of Arabic pop music, she was freshly stunned. A wave of grief rolled through her, a reminder of how heartbreak, when it was not exquisitely tender, caused physical pain.

If Zeina were still with Ray, he would be beside her now. He would be whispering in her ear that they still had time for a late-night ride if they left early enough. His hands would be on her, with that comforting firm pressure that told her she was safe. Or would that have only played out in their earlier togetherness? The years before knowing each other had fallen into complacency? Ray would be dancing with the guests first, either way. He was good like that; understood *wajib*. And because he was a professional dancer, everyone loved to see him perform.

Zeina could not have imagined such an ongoing, hostile separation. But the lengthening silence forced her to circle the same thought: how did something built over years, with so much energy and authenticity, fall apart in a mere fraction of that time?

She craned her neck this way and that, on the hunt for Noor.

For Ray.

He was tall enough to stand out. But she knew he was not there. He was not done punishing Zeina for that last conversation.

She moved towards the buffet table, edging past an enlarged image on a gold easel: Lena and her fiancé, Charlie, both looking younger than their late twenties, and beaming at their good fortune. A custom-made sign, raised high above the buffet table, proclaimed, ‘*Congratulations Lena and Charlie!*’ The white tiled floor beneath Zeina was lit up by a sprinkling of silver confetti. The few knickknacks and ornaments that signalled the family’s Arab heritage remained, but were eclipsed by white-and-silver helium balloons that dotted the room, held down by shiny black weights. A lolly bar took up one corner, tall glass jars filled with sweets: sugared almonds, chocolate pastilles, jelly raspberries and lollipops for the children.

Zeina finally stood before the savoury spread. There was one tray of untouched mansaf towards the back, and the dips, kibbeh and felafel. More ordinary finger food covered the table: sfeeha, cheese-and-zaatar pizzas and cheese-and-spinach triangles, all small enough to fit in your palm.

Zeina lifted a card at the front of a tray. It was off white with a block of bright yellow – the logo of the caterer, *Falastin by Faye*.

‘It was always my dream to run my own restaurant,’ says the fit mum-of-two.

There was a tug in her gut as it landed: Faye had won at everything. As she bit into a cheese-and-spinach triangle, Zeina mentally rebuked herself for the adolescent response; she should not have been bothered by Faye’s success. When she more closely inspected her reaction, a harsh truth clarified itself: this was not about what Faye was doing, it was about what Zeina had failed to do. She was behind in a race she had never wanted to run, but that was no reason to be a slow walker.

She took another bite, spraying pastry flakes onto her dress. There was too much of it; the ratio of filling to pastry was completely off. She stuffed the rest into her mouth then escaped to the hallway, pounded by regret that she had sent Amir back to Casablanca without her. She had lost any enthusiasm for this type

of celebration long before she had herself taken a vow of marriage at 37, celebrated in a grand wedding that met the needs of Ray's outgoing, social family.

As Zeina calculated how much longer she needed to stay before making her exit, her best friend drew up beside her, exuding pure glamour, a glass of bubbly in one hand, her glittery phone in the other. Noor's makeup enhanced her cheekbones and thick lips, kohl eyeliner and feathery fake eyelashes making her dark eyes pop. Noor was striking, no matter how much she complained about her Arab nose and propensity to gain weight. There was a sweet spot to being milyana – full, curvy, with some meat on the bones, but not 'fat'. Zeina had spent most of her life trying to crack the code, but Noor had always embraced her curves.

Zeina clutched onto Noor as they embraced, safety flowing into her like a river of calm.

'Thanks for bringing *all* the food,' Noor said, loudly enough to be heard over the music. She took a sip from the glass and observed the room, her expression tight.

The music, shrill and frenetic, increased in urgency. They watched as the groom-to-be danced with Lena in the centre of a circle three people deep, the claps and cheers meeting the song's beats in a challenge.

'Is the mansaf OK?' said Zeina.

'Who cares? You didn't need to make anything. You're a guest.'

'Are you all right?'

Noor shrugged. 'So long as they don't try to force me to dance, everyone gets to live.'

On cue, a generously proportioned aunt with gold bangles up her arm began a swaying march towards them, her eyes wide and her mouth half-open in question. She made offbeat steps, arms raised above her as though they were being moved by puppet strings. Zeina bit back a smile as she watched the aunty try to pull Noor onto the dance floor. Noor held her ground, pulling back

with enough force that the woman nearly lost her balance. The aunty gave Noor a shocked look of disapproval.

‘Yallah ... Maybe later, ya Noor. O’balik!’

Once her back was turned, Noor’s face twisted in disgust. ‘Like never,’ she said under her breath.

Zeina studied her best friend and saw it: rigidity. Her expression was firm, but so was her body. It was energy that practically sprayed out ‘fuck off’ vibes.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said Noor.

They retreated to the kitchen, where Noor made a beeline for the surplus food. ‘Ooh yes,’ she said, grabbing a plate.

Zeina urged Noor towards the mansaf. Another whole tray lay untouched. It hurt a little.

Noor devoured the food, her eyes cast down as she held a flimsy plastic plate with one hand and used a fork to pull apart the tender meat with the other, packing it in with the rice and yoghurt. She took mouthful after mouthful, closing her eyes in bliss, mumbling her approval.

‘No one cooks like you, habibti Zeina.’

Zeina nodded, biting her lip.

‘Mum got the Fayekey in because she wanted finger food. That’s the only reason.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘She actually dropped them off herself. Mum gushed over the article and she pretended to be embarrassed.’

‘Imposter-syndrome line?’

‘That and she had no idea it would be a two-page spread, and *how embarrassing.*’

Zeina rolled her eyes. ‘Well. I didn’t invent Arabic food.’

‘Oh come on, Zeina. The way she talks about everything is a carbon copy of what you used to talk about. So fucking unoriginal. Did you see her Insta video?’ Noor continued, unlocking her phone. ‘She gave an acceptance speech and thanked everyone but the cat.’

‘Especially her husband for putting up with her while she worked nights to get it all done?’

‘Yep. “Tony! Tony, Toni, Toné!” And something about the fruit of her loins.’

Noor was about to hit ‘play’ when Zeina closed the screen. ‘How are you going? Really?’

Noor scooped rice onto her spoon. It sat suspended, midway to her mouth. ‘Mum hid Claudia’s photos.’ She exhaled then shoved it in. ‘*We can’t make Lena’s engagement another funeral,*’ she said with her mouth full.

Even Zeina initially had wondered at the splendour of the party. It was only a year ago that Noor had lost her younger sister in the cruellest of circumstances. When Noor’s sister Rita had got engaged several years ago, it had been a large party but there was no lolly bar or buffet. There had been a two-tier cake, sugared-almond bonbons, fresh Lebanese sweets – the kind dripping in syrup and stuffed with fresh cream – and alcohol, mainly shots of arak. When Noor had quietly agreed to a union of her own with Mo twelve years ago, a man Noor’s mother could barely acknowledge, there was no party at all, just a stiff but polite gathering of the families for an engagement ceremony and modest feast. But for Lena, it seemed as if Noor’s parents were overdoing their efforts.

‘I’m sorry, Noor.’

‘How do they pretend she didn’t exist?’

‘They’re not doing that. They just need to forget for a minute.’

‘How do you forget?’

No one was capable of forgetting, but Noor was on a mission to ensure no one could. She sought not simply to preserve Claudia’s existence, but to make sense of her sudden illness, to find justice in an unfair and brutal premature death. The calculations, recalculations, the mountainous what-ifs and punishing research. Noor had become so literate in double-hit lymphoma that even Zeina had gained knowledge. *A rare blood cancer, snaps the life out of its victims too quickly, most especially the young.* Claudia, taken by it at twenty-five.

Noor shook it off then took another bite. 'Let's talk about something else.' She waited a beat, then without looking up, she said, 'He was invited.'

This was not a surprise. What churned in Zeina's mind was the shock that Ray would overlook his wajib in favour of his anger towards Zeina.

'We don't have to talk about it,' she said, though her insides rattled.

'I don't think he's coming,' Noor replied.

'Did you tell him I'd be here?'

Noor gave her an incredulous look, which silenced Zeina.

'Why don't you just speak to him?'

'Because I'm not the one who stopped speaking.'

'Are you really surprised?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Noor tossed her plate aside as she finished off a mouthful. She released an elongated sigh, then levelled her eyes at Zeina. When she saw Zeina's hurt face, she softened. 'Why are you so angry with him?'

'He's the one who's angry with me.'

'He's hurt. You told him you don't want to be married to him anymore.'

'I didn't say that,' said a stunned Zeina.

Noor's eyes widened, but then she looked out the kitchen window to the garden and scratched her nose. 'Honestly ... I kind of get it. If he broke up with you, would you want to see him?'

Zeina busied herself with clearing away stray butcher paper from the food trays, crinkling the cellophane from the baklawa above Noor's voice.

Noor tugged on Zeina's dress. 'Zeina. Don't be mad.'

Zeina scrunched up more paper and tossed it into an open rubbish bin.

'I'm here for you. You know that.'

Noor had offered her couch indefinitely, but Zeina had entered her forties with lower back problems and a greater desire for comfort and aloneness. After two weeks on Noor's couch, she had signed a lease in desperation.

Zeina stood in her hurt, calculating Noor's response. 'He is my best friend, not just my husband.'

Noor nodded. 'Yeah. But you can't always have both.'

Before Zeina could respond, A'mou Hassan entered and called out to his daughter. His eyes flitted to Zeina and he placed a hand to his chest.

'Mabrook, A'mou,' said Zeina.

'How are you, habibti? How is your father?' He added in Arabic, 'Salamtu, Allah yeshfee.'

'Allah ye salmak. He'd be better if he would rest.'

A bright-eyed Hassan threw his head back and laughed. 'Good luck with that! Yallah you two, come back inside and dance.'

Noor began mounting an objection, but her father's expression darkened. Amid a flurry of limp protestations, she followed him out of the kitchen to the party, and in a rush called out to Zeina, 'You've got this!'

Noor's frequent refrain dropped like a lead balloon.

Zeina hung back, prickling at the thread of discomfort that stretched between them. Moving over to the entrance, she watched them through a hallway arch. Noor's sparkly black dress shone among the fuchsia and teal, as did her high heels, which had diamante-laced straps that glittered as she half-heartedly kicked her feet in the air.

Noor caught Zeina's attention and beckoned her to join. Zeina shook her head, her mind still whirring from their earlier conversation. It wasn't a disagreement. But Noor's sympathy towards Ray ... it stuck to her like glue.

'Do you know how good we have it?'

'I love you. And I think we're the best of friends.'

'Yeah? Well, that all goes away if we end things.'

How to tell Noor that she didn't have to choose, but if she was going to, then choose Zeina – at least for a time as she found her way out of the wilderness?

Zeina glimpsed Abila, Noor's mother, who was observing her daughters with a satisfied look, her lips pressed tightly together in a straight line. Her eyes glittered, satisfied but empty.



As the party guests lifted Lena and Charlie up on dining chairs, Zeina escaped, trotting down the steps to the back garden from the kitchen. As she walked towards a set of lawn chairs, her heels digging into the wet grass, the plucky instrumentals and heavy drums of the Arabic pop music faded.

Zeina didn't recognise any of the tracks; none of them sounded like the innocent love songs from her teenage years. Epic tales about twin souls and lost loves, flooded by joyful melodies but stupidly idealistic in their lyrics. Noor and her sisters would consume the cheesy video clips. How they would dance and sing along, Claudia like a proper songstress, the rest of them completely out of tune. The memory of it ached. Not only the loss of Claudia, but how it carved so deeply into their entire reality.

Rain began falling in a light mist and Zeina closed her eyes, turning her face to a night sky full of stars. The lawn chair was damp and cold against her thighs, but in the fresh air, she could breathe again.

Her marriage woes would fill the mouths of the neighbourhood aunties until they were settled, with conviction. But tonight, it was Noor and her family they were watching, and Zeina sensed Noor's contempt in response. She had felt like the fourth sister for so many years, but she could not claim the same grief about Claudia. However, she could not fault Noor's fractured response. She wouldn't want to fake-smile either, to pretend that every kick of the dabke didn't feel like a kick in the face.

‘O’balik.’

Zeina’s eyes flew open at the sound of Ray’s voice. She scrambled forward, but the garden was empty. A murmur of voices led her attention towards the back garden gate.

‘Fuck off,’ said Noor.

Zeina saw the top of Ray’s head above the tall fence, the leather of his jacket on his shoulders, but she dared not move. Dressed for a ride, not an engagement. Between the distant but persistent thrum of Arabic music and the occasional passing car, Zeina had to strain to hear the conversation.

‘I don’t see you for a hundred years ... you’re underdressed.’ Noor switched to Arabic. ‘Shame on you.’

‘I’ve been busy.’

‘... We *can* still talk.’

‘... teaching a few nights ...’

Zeina wrestled with her next step. The idea of joining them was beyond possibility, and the realisation rocked her so deeply that she actually felt dizzy.

A car pumping R’n’B blocked out the conversation, then dissolved into murmurs and mirth. What could be so funny?

Zeina was on her knees on the grass. In a desperate, humiliating act, she crawled towards the gate, scraping her skin against the muddy grass, slow and methodical so as to minimise the sound of her movements.

‘... Fucking TikTok,’ said Ray.

‘Kids these days.’

Ray scoffed. ‘We’re the oldies now.’

‘I never thought you would stop performing.’

‘I’m lucky I got as far as I did. Anyway,’ said Ray.

The moment folded into silence. Finally, Noor spoke: ‘Are you just going to avoid her forever?’

Zeina held her breath, curious but also relieved to have Noor ask the question she wanted to ask Ray herself.

Ray gave no response.

‘Kind of a bullshit move?’ said Noor.

Ray still said nothing and Zeina’s face stiffened. She closed her eyes and waited.

‘My mum won’t forget that you didn’t come inside.’

‘I’ll risk it. Here’s something for the kids.’

‘Fine ... But I won’t forget it, either. I’ll walk with you.’

The sound of Noor’s heels faded, but the music from the party was amplified by cheers, the stamping of feet louder than before.



Zeina stayed on the grass. He came and left. She prickled at the ease in his dialogue with Noor. He was doing just fine without her, as she had known he would. Ray, the man who had always been prepared not just for a rainy day, but a tsunami. He was the most diligent and organised person Zeina knew. He was careful and considered. Planned ahead. Recorded every dollar he spent. Life was a business and he ran it with precision and measured reactivity.

How did they get here? The active ingredients remained mysterious, like they were dangerous chemicals that needed to be handled with care. It was becoming clear that Zeina was under-equipped to do so.

Zeina remained in the garden, massaging the hurt and confusion. She was annoyed, too. She had emerged as a villain in a story she had never wanted a place in. She wanted a rewrite. Some nuance, please.

She slowly rose to her feet, aware suddenly that she had dirtied her dress and there were identical muddy grass stains on her knees.

‘Is there someone else?’

This was the moment: Zeina could go after Ray. He would not run away. But she was in no mood to force a conversation. It would be frosty, of that she was certain.

They had transitioned from a gentle winter into a fierce storm.

The way he didn't hear her in that conversation; he only heard himself.

For a moment, Zeina wondered if silence at least offered a sense of possibility; a curt hello would be a conclusion. If he was avoiding her, he was also holding off a definitive ending.

'Do you know how good we have it?'

'Are you OK, sis?'

'Excuse me?'

Zeina found a young woman staring at her, a vape perched between her heavily accessorised fingers. She wore an abundance of makeup, a nose ring and a headscarf that barely covered her head. 'You look kinda pale.'

'I'm fine. Thanks.'

'Your dress is dirty. You should put something on it before it stains permanently.'

'Try the mansaf,' she told the woman, before walking in the direction of the kitchen, her mind pulsing with the conversation she had just overheard, with splintered memories.

In the kitchen, Zeina found herself alone again. She squared her shoulders as she rested her back against the kitchen bench.

'Is there someone in your head?'

They were existing without her. Being friends without her. A world Zeina no longer inhabited was still turning and evolving.

'This all goes away if we end things.'

Protesting thoughts circulated wildly. There was an untrained orchestra playing loudly in Zeina's mind. Why was it that the thought of not having Ray in her life physically hurt in a way that she could not deny? And yet, the thought of remaining as she had been had resulted in a different kind of anguish.



That night, Zeina swam laps in the pool at her complex. It was the one feature of her overpriced temporary home that justified the cost. Her apartment was a studio. But she had embraced

swimming, sometimes before work, other times at night, when the building was asleep.

She was exhausted by the day's events. By recent developments. Perhaps, really, her entire history. Why was it that so many things were collapsing in on her at once? Could they not have spaced themselves out?

The cascade.

Zeina's freestyle was a meditation. The water cleansed, but every stroke was an affirmation that she was moving forward. That she must not allow herself to constantly look back.

She swam six laps then came to a stop at the shallow end. She was all alone. Through the windows, she could see the quaking trees and hear the hush of the wind sweeping through the leaves. She was comforted by the sound as she dived in again, embraced by nature even from within those four walls.

In this thin offering of peace, clarity arrived. Perhaps Ray was not done punishing Zeina, but she was done being punished.

3

Ten years ago

THE MEETING

The ice-cream truck was a vintage model: bright pink with hyper-coloured cone varieties painted on the side panel beside the window. ‘Greensleeves’ whined through the speakers. It was a balmy summer evening and Zeina was driving her new Toyota Yaris with the windows open.

Beside her sat Noor, who with a mischievous grin, stuck her head out the passenger side. ‘Show us your ice-creams!’

They dissolved into peals of laughter as a proud Noor quickly rolled up the window.

‘You dickhead,’ Zeina said.

Noor raised her shoulders, unruffled, taking a bow with her arms to an imaginary audience in front of her. ‘Thank you, I’m here all week.’ When their laughter settled, she leaned down to open a greasy paper bag. ‘This smells so fucking good,’ she said, grabbing a handful of thick-cut hot chips.

‘And you’re going to stink up my car. Open the window. We’re not going to get chased down by an ice-cream van.’

Noor did as requested, then handed Zeina a serving of chips bundled in a napkin. Zeina’s tummy rumbled at the scent of the

deep-fried potato. She was on her period. She wanted deep-fried everything.

At a red light, they munched on the chips, bopping along to Jordin Sparks. ‘Just the right amount of salt,’ Zeina murmured.

Beside them, Oasis blasted out of the speakers. Zeina’s eyes flicked over to a beat-up Mazda, occupied by three male twenty-somethings. She lowered the volume and turned her attention to the lights.

‘Can we have one?’

Zeina and Noor both glanced over. The request had come from the driver. He looked English. Cute. Not Zeina’s type. Beside him was a taller, darker man with an embarrassed, apologetic expression. He was Arab, for sure. In the back, another Arab: bearded, well built, baseball cap, his lips twisted in amusement as he leaned into the door, one hand against the window, the back of his fingers tapping against the glass.

Noor leaned forward, eyeing the front passengers. ‘You want a hot chip?’

The driver mirrored Noor, inclining towards them. He held up his phone and indicated to Zeina with a grin. ‘No, I want *her* number.’

Noor gasped, delighted. Zeina’s cheeks bloomed red.

‘I’d rather give you the hot chips,’ Zeina told him.

It was his turn to laugh. ‘Come on, just give me your number. Before the lights change.’

‘I’m not giving you my number.’

Noor boomed her, loudly, and the driver cackled. ‘See, even your mate thinks you should give me your number. What’s the problem?’ He revved the engine.

‘I don’t know you.’

‘But now we’ve met. My name’s Andy.’ He indicated to the passenger beside him. ‘This is my mate Ray. In the back is Ta’reeq,’ he said, massacring the pronunciation of Tariq.

Tariq acknowledged them with a single wave.

Zeina checked in with Noor. They both mouthed it: *Ta'reeq*, then chuckled.

'Look, if it's fate, we'll meet again,' Zeina said, turning back to Andy.

'Do you believe in fate?'

'I guess.'

'Well, it's fate, then. Quickly, it's about to change.'

The lights turned green. Noor jeered in protest and Andy shrugged, calling out to her: 'Who are you to reject the fates?'

He took off and Zeina, an odd, nervy excitement curdling within, slowly drove ahead. They came to another stop beside each other at the next set of lights. Andy was already leaning out of the window.

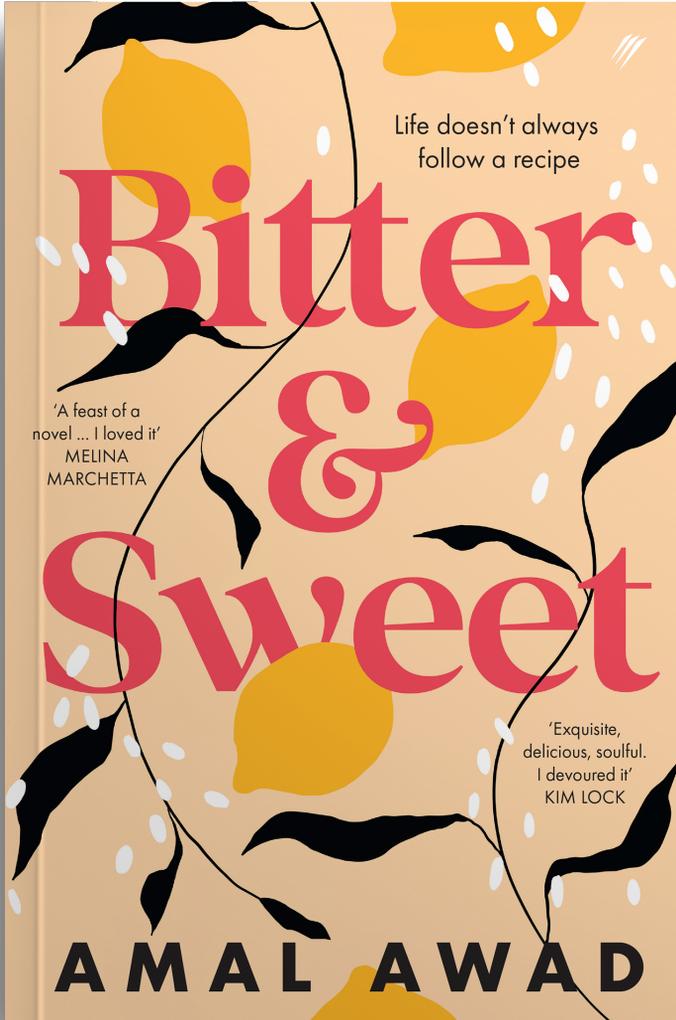
'You're just jealous because my car is better than yours,' he quipped. Beside him, Ray shook his head, but his smile seemed permanent. He met Zeina's eyes and she found herself staring back at him. The connection existed in a short-lived bubble, Zeina conscious of Noor's excitement, her hands gripping into her arm. He was handsome and his enquiring, shy eyes disarmed Zeina. She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't form.

She shook herself back into the present. The Mazda was a bomb. 'Yeah, that's what it is. I'm super jealous.'

'Casablanca!' yelled Noor over Zeina, fighting her away when Zeina tried to cover her mouth. 'Go to Casablanca!'

The lights changed.

Noor was breathless from laughter. 'He was hot. What's wrong with you?'



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