

Soul of a Butterfly

A NOVEL

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BY SAFAA BAIG

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Chapter One

“Katieeeee! Wake uuup! Come down quick. I’ve made waffles, and you know how fast they finish!” I heard my mum call out.

Waffles? Did she just say waffles? I’m dreaming, I thought, as I sluggishly yanked my eyes open, and checked the time. Nine in the morning, oh yes, definitely a dream.

“Katieeeeeeee! Maaaark! If you don’t come down right this minute—“

“O-kaaay! I’m up! I’m up!” I yelled back, as I rubbed my eyes sleepily and crawled into the bathroom. Glancing at myself in the mirror through half-lidded eyes, I sighed, I really need to get some sleep. Just then, the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls wafted into the bathroom, and my eyes sprang open. Swiftly, I yanked my long blonde hair into a high ponytail before rushing through my daily cleansing routine, and hurried downstairs.

Yawning noisily, I stumbled into the kitchen to find my work-a-holic mum whipping up a jug of banana milkshake. Wide-eyed, I froze for a moment, staring at the kitchen scene before me as if transfixed, rubbed my eyes again, and then blinked twice for good measure. “Uhh....mum. What’s with the food? Something special today?” I asked, gazing around at the waffles, pancakes, freshly squeezed orange juice, and delicious-looking cinnamon rolls on the breakfast table. My mum turned to face me and beamed, “No. Nothing special, just your average healthy breakfast at home. Why? Don't you like it?” she asked, biting her lips.

“Yeah, sure, but normally our ‘average healthy breakfast at home’ is a bowl of Frosties and a Coke,” I said slowly, wondering what on earth was wrong with my normally ‘self-assured, make-your-own-breakfast and you-are-what-you-eat-so-here’s-a-coke’ mother.

“Well...I...” my mum started, quickly forming a juicy lie in her mind but then just as quickly changing her mind as she glanced at my narrowed eyes. “I read this article in the

newspaper that said fifteen percent of teenagers these days leave home because of the awful breakfast. And I'm not saying you're *leaving* home or anything, because you wouldn't have any reason to, but just so that you feel more comfortable with your *home* so that there really will be no reason for leaving, because I mean you wouldn't....you're not an average teenager....," she rambled on as fast as she could.

"Yeah, I'm far from average. Do you have to rub it in my face?" I teased, reaching around her to grab a glass.

"Oh, honey...I was joking. Of course you're not err...different, you're an average teenager who would never have any idea of leaving this house, right?" she circled her arms around my shoulders and smiled so widely that it hurt to know she couldn't hide a secret. Oh yeah, she was definitely up to something.

"Oh, dearest, I would never ever have any idea of running away; I mean my god this breakfast just looks *absolutely, unutterably, indescribably* mouth-watering. You wouldn't mind if I stayed here for the next ten years, would you?" I asked, putting on a serious face, before turning around to cover my laughter, and taking a big gulp of milkshake.

"Katie, of course I'd love that and you'd be more than welcome—" she stated, laying a hand on my shoulder, "Wait, what are you...are you *laughing*?" Whipping me around to face her, she narrowed her eyes angrily.

"You don't have to make fun of me! I'm just trying to be a good mum. You're practically anorexic and you should eat more!" she scolded me.

So that's what all this was for, because I'm...wait...did she say *anorexic*?

"What'd she do now?" asked my annoying older brother, Mark, as he walked into the kitchen in his usual morning disarray.

"*AAAnorexic!!!* What do you mean anorexic? Can't you see all this fat?!" I spat out indignantly, pulling at my stomach which unfortunately seemed to have shrunk in the last few minutes.

"You are!" she shot right back.

Mark looked at us strangely, "Okay...*mum* she's definitely anorexic but you didn't have to say it to her face and *Kay*....," he took one look at my furious face and simply said, "Chill, would you?"

That was the final straw. "Chill? *Chill*? You chill!" I lunged at him.

My mum pulled me back, “Katie, he doesn’t mean it! Really, Katie, let *go!*” she cried. It was sort of fun, like a ‘tug of war’ game. Mark tried to pull away from my iron grasp and my mum tried to pull me away from yanking his hair out.

“*Mum*, he called me anorexic!” I yelled, completely forgetting that she had too.

“Mark, go to your room,” she said.

“Wha...wha...you said –” he started, but was interrupted with a “Go now!”

“What about breakfast?” he asked so dejectedly that she managed to smile slightly.

“Ummm...fine! Sit down and eat! But don’t you dare say a word!” she exclaimed, and then turned her attention back to me.

“Katie, you want to eat now?” she asked hopefully.

“You just want me to eat 'cos you think I’m anorexic,” I replied back snottily.

“Honey, I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re really not eating these days, and I know that as soon as school restarts after the half-term holidays, with all the recreational activities and going to friends’ houses, not to mention those crazy outdoor trips your Dad takes you on, you’ll get even thinner. I’m sorry, everything I said was rubbish. Forget I said anything. I mean look at you, you look even bigger than me,” she cooed at me. I beamed and was just about to ask “Really?” when Mark snorted. That did it!

I went over to the glossy black kitchen table and smacked his head into his plate of waffles. Silence. My mum gasped and then started to giggle, which started me off. He picked his head up and glared at me as blueberry syrup slowly dripped down his face. I smiled angelically and sat down opposite him. “Serves *you* right.”

He got up. “You are dead meat!”

“You wanna fight, huh?” I stood up into a karate position and held my arms in front of me as defence. He just stared at me.

“Huh? You scared, Mark Anderson? You think I can’t karate chop you right this minute. You’re wrong. Yeah man, I got moves you never seen before. I’m real good. Dad taught me,” I said, hopping from side to side. Honestly, I only knew a few punches and hand twists and was beginning to wonder how long it would take to run back upstairs. What if he really did take up my offer? I looked up at Mark then, sizing him up. Oh boy, when did he get so big? Suddenly, his face creased with laughter as he pointed at me, and

he continued to hoot for a full two minutes, every once in a while, looking at my bewildered face and starting off again. Annoyed, I went up to him and threw a few punches. Nothing. My mum joined in on the laughing, leaning on the spotless white kitchen counter.

I rolled my eyes as my mouth twitched slightly.

“Ah, I’m seeing something,” Mark grinned knowingly at me, “Wait, is that a smile?”

“Shut up,” I laughed, shoving him aside as I sat back down at the table.

He went off to wash his face, still laughing, and my mum sighed, “To think it took me a whole hour to make this breakfast and now it’s cold and ruined.”

I smiled at her sweetly. “Don’t worry. As soon as sparky comes back here, I’ll give him a few whacks and he’ll gobble it all down.”

“Just try me,” Mark said, a grin still on his face, as he returned to his chair.

“Nah, I don’t want to damage that small brain of yours and stop you from getting into university which would mean *away* from me, or hurt your face which sadly already resembles Frankenstein’s. I do wonder sometimes,” I smiled mockingly, “how can we possibly be related?”

“*This* small brain happened to get all A’s in his exams and Frankenstein’s got a special date in half an hour. So there!”

“No way! *Liar*,” I replied, eyes bulging out, shaking my head. Honestly, I was gobsmailed; I mean, not that Mark isn’t good-looking and all, but it’s just that he’s been described as something of a ‘heart-breaker’ in the past year, which makes these dates quite rare, to say the least.

Mum says that me and Mark used to look like a pair of chicken legs, skinny, scrawny kids with thin straw-coloured hair dangling off our heads, small noses and tiny eyes, but then one summer we ‘blossomed’ and when we went back to school we were suddenly noticed not just for our looks but for everything else that we’re special for. To me, it just sounds like a ‘You’re-the-most-special-kid-in-the-world’ lecture that mothers often give, though my mum likes adding in a few gruesome effects to make it sound more real. Dad, on the other hand, says we’ve always been good-looking and normally winks at me when he says it, also adding in a “You know who you got that from, huh Katie?” Parents, you

never can figure them out. Having divorced when I was six, I'd always take turns asking them the same questions, 'How do you know the Earth is round? Why don't animals speak? Who invented school? Where is God?', and believe me, getting completely different answers from them left me pretty troubled.

So now, a smug Mark, at six feet two inches, smirked down at me from his side of the table. Somehow over the years he'd had a tremendous growth spurt; in addition to this, his thin straw-coloured hair has been replaced by soft ash blonde hair slightly skimming his shoulders. His playful spring green eyes, which he inherited from my mother, were now sparkling with triumph as they dared me to question him further, needless to say he has many a times been described by my classmates as a 'hunk'. I narrowed my deep sky blue eyes at him and threw my straight golden hair over my shoulder, reminding him that only last week I'd been invited out on four dates, and refused all of them on account of not being in the mood. I lifted my heart-shaped face high in the air and stuck my tongue out at him. If he had inherited my mum's beautiful features, then I had definitely inherited my dad's. Most people say I'm his mirror-image, not just in looks but in personality as well.

Gulping down another glass of banana milkshake, I quickly turned to the remaining cinnamon roll on my plate, finished it off, and then pushed back my chair.

"Well, I'm off. It's a Fridayyy!" I sang, plonking my dish into the sink and giving my mum a quick peck on the cheek. "Thanks for the spectacular breakfast," I said, before trotting up the stairs to my room. Pulling on a pair of Levis quickly, I flung open my wardrobe and scrimmaged around until I found the black t-shirt from Topshop that I was looking for. Dashing in front of the mirror, I let loose my hair and shook it about, then finished off my look with some Rimmel lip gloss and Maxfactor eyeliner. I glanced at myself in the long six-foot mirror my dad had bought me a year ago and smiled, not bad.

Not bad at all.

“Hello, Ellie. Would you be a dear and help me out?” I heard a scratchy voice coming from my right, just as I shut the front door.

I turned to see who it was and found myself smiling at Mrs Willow. She’s an ancient neighbour of ours and knew my mum, Eleanor, when she was little, hence the ‘Ellie’. She often says I resemble my mother so much that I remind her of her, the fact that I quite clearly look like my dad though has brought me to the conclusion that she doesn't want to bother learning a new name, or that she doesn't like him. On the plus side, hearing her call Mark ‘Arthur’ always sends me into a fit of laughter.

“Yes, of course. How can I help?” I grinned at her, as I walked up to the wooden fence that divided the two houses.

“Winnie’s gone!” she gasped, grasping my hand tightly.

Winnie is her cat and drives Mark bonkers. Whenever Winnie goes missing, which is ninety per cent of the time, she begs Mark to go look for him. I remember the last time it happened and Mark ended up going down four blocks searching for her and when he finally came home, he’d screamed, flopping onto the couch, grass sticking out of his hair, as he glared into my laughing face, “Old Mrs Willow lost that wretched cat again! I searched every corner, street and park within a mile’s radius. And where did I find her? Huh, Katie?”

I’d meekly replied, “In the back garden.”

“Y...yes. How’d you know?” His anger instantly dissipated as he stared at me in confusion.

“Because he’s been there every other time you’ve gone searching for him, stupid,” I’d laughed.

Now as I looked at Mrs Willow pointedly, I asked, “Have you checked the back garden?”

“Of course! Now don’t you go on like Arthur, I checked it twice,” she nodded her head proudly. I smiled politely as I stood there waiting for her to let me search Winnie’s favourite hiding place.

“All right, go on in. But I’ll tell you now, I doubt—” she started but I’d already rushed into the garden in search of Winnie. My eyes searched around the massive back garden in which Mrs Willow had made sure to plant every type of flower known on the planet. I

jogged up to the small rosebush on the left side and smiled, "Ah, Winnie. Come on out."

I ran back up to Mrs Willow, handing her the cat as she stared dazedly at me, still finishing her sentence "—you'll be able to find him there," and then hurriedly sprinted out of the house and onto the neighbourhood street.

"I'm going up to Kings Mall, see you later!"

I ran up to the nearest bus stop and fell on the bench, trying to catch my breath.

"Katie?"

Hoping with all my heart that Mrs Willow hadn't followed me, I looked up to see a squinting Christy behind the wheel of a bright orange Aston martin. Her platinum blonde hair had been woven into a complex French braid and her crystal emerald eyes hidden beneath a pair of large Mont Blanc sunglasses. Christy Milano is a classmate of mine and easily one of the most popular girls in our school. I've known her since nursery school and we've never really gotten along, to say the least. While she play-acted 'Queen Christy' during classroom breaks, showering her admirers with expensive gifts, I ran around playing 'tag' and leading the rest of the classroom on wild adventure games. So now, even though we both rank about the same level of popularity, she's constantly competing for 'Queen bee' status. What we do not rank however is the same lifestyle, the spacious four bedroom house I live in located in Belgravia is nothing compared to her stunning seven bedroom mansion in Mayfair, complete with a pool, cinema and boasting a good ten thousand square foot, and happens to be just one of houses. And that is exactly why I was not looking forward to her seeing me, sitting at the bus stop, on a Friday morning.

"Christy! What are you doing here?" I yelped, my voice sounding an octave higher than usual, as my mind scrambled around for some excuse to feed her.

"Oh, just came to drop off some charity things at some organization Daddy's funding," she said, disgustedly.

"Charity?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh yes...Daddy said I had to. I don't know why he even wants to give them clothes. I mean, it's not our fault they're poor, and personally, I think handing out designer clothes to them isn't going to make them anymore richer or anything," she grumbled, a mixture of hate and irritation in her voice.

I raised my eyebrows slightly.

“Don't look at me like that, I'm serious. So what are you doing?” she asked curiously.

“Oh...well...,” I coughed, realizing quickly that I was completely out of ideas, “I...umm...I was just going up to...to...Kings Mall,” I mumbled.

“Kings Mall?” she wrinkled her nose, “Why would you want to go *there*?”

Now, Kings Mall is your ordinary Mall, with ordinary shops, and ordinary people. But you see, Christy had never really considered herself ordinary, and so the idea of one of her ‘friends’ going there was quite...blasphemous.

“I...umm...need to pick up some groceries,” I improvised on the spot, “...from errm...Sainsbury's!”

“Oh.” She smiled politely, as if realizing then just how vastly different our lives were, “I see.”

I smiled back at her tightly and then turned my head in pretence of looking around, hoping with all hopes that she'd leave now.

“So, how are you getting there?” she asked.

I looked at her dumbfounded and then at the bus stop where I was sitting and then back at her.

Her eyes widened in astonishment as she put the pieces together, “A *bus*. Oh god! Katie, are you sure you want to be seen in that? Come on, I'll give you a ride. You never know about public transport nowadays. So dangerous,” she shook her head at me pitifully, moving aside a pile of magazines that were taking up most of the seat next to her, and then beckoned me over once more.

I stared longingly at the polished car and let out a sigh. “That's sweet of you, but I can't.”

“Oh yes, you can. Hurry up,” she exclaimed. I shot her a gracious smile, just as her eyes began to glance fleetingly around at the people nearby. I followed her gaze and quickly realized that people had begun to stare. It wasn't every day that a girl in an Aston Martin picked you up from the bus stop.

“Katie, I said come on!” she repeated for the third time, making it sound more like a demand than a request. In that moment, it dawned upon me that what I'd considered to

be Christy's generosity was in fact her desire to keep up appearances. Still, I was not someone who gave up a free ride in an Aston Martin.

"Umm...sure thing!" I replied, forcing a smile and settling myself into the seat next to her.

As she drove, we gossiped about teachers, classmates and 'normal' girls.

At last, we reached the Mall, and I thanked her once again for the ride. I strolled inside, her cursory gaze following me, and then spent the next five minutes in Sainsbury's purchasing bubble gum and a pack of crisps for myself, just in case she happened to follow me inside. Finally, after a quick peek outside to make sure she'd left for good, I turned and made my way to Primark - home to some of the coolest fashion clothes at a cheap budget. Life sure isn't fair.

Chapter Two

“Mo-om, I’m home!” I yelled loudly as I stumbled into the house carrying a load of groceries in my arms, a week later.

“Yes, yes of course, I understand. Yeah, she just came back so I’ll tell her now. No, she’s busy putting away the groceries, so she’ll call you later. Okay now. Bye.” My mum sighed as she put the phone back on its cradle.

“Your dad can be such a pain sometimes,” she mumbled as she got up to help me.

“Was that him on the phone? And Sam told me to tell you they’ve got an ‘All You Can Eat’ lunch at Ringo’s tomorrow,” I said as I swung the fridge door open with my leg, two milk cartons in my hands.

“Really? That’s just great. I wanted to stay on a little longer after work and now I don’t have to make lunch,” she smiled, eyes gleaming.

I laughed. So typical of mum, she’d do anything to be able to get out of cooking.

Mark, who was hurriedly typing on his laptop in the living room, yelled “Can I bring Joe and Tony with me?”

“Yeah sure, my treat!” she yelled back, still grinning.

“So, was that Dad on the phone?” I urged impatiently.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. He said he wants to pick you up tomorrow and spend the weekend with you. But...,” her smile slowly crept away as she spoke.

“Great! That’s super! I haven’t seen him in ages, who knew his six week trip to Morocco would turn into six whole months. Did he say when he’s coming over?” I interrupted her excitedly and was mumbling to myself when I remembered the low ‘but’.

“W...wait you said but? But what?” I asked, anxious now.

“Well, love, he...he said he has to talk to you about a few things and that I should maybe expect you to be back early. You know, you might not like what he has to say,” she hesitated as she spoke, watching me carefully for a reaction.

“A few things? Expect me back early? No, he probably just lost the semi-final tickets I gave him a month ago. They’re showing soon but...I didn’t really want to go and I mainly got them for him,” I replied, still excited though burning with curiosity. I wondered what he wanted to talk to me about; he was well aware that I wouldn’t really sweat over those tickets.

“Yeah well, don’t expect it to be so small. He sounded pretty worried. And...” she was leaning towards me now and started whispering “... Mark’s been pretty low since he met your father two days ago.”

“Yeah, well whatever. No use sweating about it now, Mum. Oh, by the way, did Jayne call? She had some ‘gotta-tell-you-now-or-I’ll-die’ news for me.” I strolled into the living room and picked up the phone.

“Yeah. She’s been calling ever since you left. What’s that about?”

Jayne Collins is my all-time best friend; we’ve known each other ever since our exhausted mum’s potty trained us, been through thick and thin together (if that’s what you call bad hair days and excited tennis tournaments), and are practically like sisters now. I know every item that lies in her bedroom and every lipstick in her makeup drawer and she knows all the channels on my TV and exactly what ticks off Mark.

The phone rang right then, signalling Jayne’s growing impatience.

“Hello, who is it?” I sang happily.

“Who do you think?” she replied angrily. “I’ve been calling you for the past three hours. Where were you?”

“Oh, just went out to get us some groceries and I did a bit of window shopping too. Did you know Topshop’s got a new line out? Gorgeous stuff. How about you?” I replied cheerfully, plonking myself down on the living room sofa and grabbing the TV remote from Mark’s loose hand.

“Topshop’s got a —” she began, side-tracked for a moment and then quickly reverted back to her sour tone. “Are you *trying* to make me mad?”

“Nope.” I smiled, dragging the word out.

“Well, do you wanna know or not?” she asked with an edge of indifference, though I knew inside she was itching to tell.

“Well...that depends...,” I started.

“Dad bought Jeff the car he wanted!”

“What?!” I screamed, sitting up instantly and causing Mark to jump out of his seat. “Mercedes Benz SL 600?” I asked breathlessly.

“Yes!” she screamed animatedly.

“No! *No way*. Oh my god. You’ve got to be kidding me!” I yelled.

“And you know what that means...,” she squealed as I finished her sentence, “We get to ride in his car.”

“Man, this is so great. We don’t have to ride in Mark’s trash anymore and we get to show it off when school starts! Oh, this is terrific. Congratulate him from me,” I said, bouncing with excitement and ignoring Mark’s angry scowl.

Jeff is Jayne’s older brother *by five minutes*, he’s as close to me as Mark is. Sometimes it’s hard for Jayne to keep up with us as we rant on together about our favourite movies, books and music. We both cheer for the same football team while Jayne paints my toenails and visit sleek car showrooms while Jayne goes perfume shopping. I’m not saying Jayne and I aren’t close, but he’s as close as it gets to a second best friend. And believe me, having twins as best friends can be side-splitting sometimes. They have no resemblance whatsoever and are on pretty good terms with one another, aside from the occasional teasing from Jeff. Jayne and I have always been in the same class, which may be one of the reasons we’re inseparable, but Jeff has some incredible IQ or something and was immediately put in a higher year when he started school; he also happens to be the captain of our school’s football team.

She laughed, “Jeff wants to talk to you. And I’ve got to check out the ‘Zara’ sale with mum right now, so I’ll talk to you tomorrow. See ya.”

“All right, bye.” I laughed, shaking my head at her shopping addiction.

“Hello?” I heard Jeff’s deep voice on the other end.

“Jeff? Congrats! You’re so lucky. I mean, SL 600? That’s like...wow. What’d you do to convince your dad? No wait, you got a scholarship right? Oh my god. You’re just too

lucky. I heard it has a —”

“Whoa. Kay, slow down. You’re talking too fast. Start from the start, what were you saying?” he asked, his voice tinged with amusement.

“Yeah so, umm...congrats. Nice car. Good Grades. Can’t wait to ride it,” I replied back casually, the excitement still in my voice.

“Thanks. You're gonna love it. It's exactly your type," he replied graciously.

"Pfffft. Of course it is. I'm the one who recommended it to you!" I laughed at his ignorance, so typical of boys.

"Yeah, sure you did. As I recall, you wanted me to get the McLaren SLR. Which my dad would never get, seeing as it's double the price," he replied, and I could picture him rolling his eyes at my 'so-called' stupidity.

"Yeah, well whatever. It's still a Mercedes; I guess it's just too bad my taste is more expensive than yours," I huffed, smirking inwardly.

His answering laugh was cheerful, "You got that right, Kay. Don't know where I'd be without your *superior* taste in cars."

"That's right. Don't ever forget." I laughed back, enjoying the moment.

It was always easy talking to Jeff, I loved that I could be myself, not having to explain my actions all the time and that he appreciated me for who I was, as was the same with Jayne.

"So umm... are you staying home tomorrow?" he asked, still chuckling softly.

“Yeah. I mean, why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, I was just wondering.”

We were quiet for a few seconds; I was thinking frantically, wondering if there was a huge party I’d forgotten about.

“Yeah so, you with your dad this weekend?” he asked curiously, a hint of impatience in his voice, signalling why he had initially wanted to speak to me.

“Yeah. It’s gonna be absolutely great, he has some surprise planned for me. Maybe he’s planning a trip to Bristol or Leicester like last time,” I gushed happily.

“When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. Next week some time, maybe. Why?”

“No reason.”

“You’re not telling me something. What happened? Is something wrong?”

“Nah, you’re always jumping to conclusions, Kay. Let’s just say I’ve.... got a surprise for you too. Monday morning, 7 o’clock sharp, my place. Be there.” He said, matter-of-factly and then hung up.

Two surprises with the weekend closing in. What more could a girl want?

Chapter Three

"Dad! Where have you been? You were supposed to call the minute you got back. You promised," I scolded him over the phone, only seconds after answering it.

He chuckled, "Hey pumpkin, I missed you. I was going to call but...I got caught up with a few things."

"Like?"

"You'll know in due time."

"*What*," I asked with exaggerated annoyance, "is up with all this secrecy? First Mark, then mum and now you —"

"Guess what? I've got a surprise for you."

"You know that's not gonna work, Dad. I'm not a child anymore, so stop —"

"Look outside your window."

"What?"

"I said look outside —"

"Why?" I interrupted him, turning my body so that I was now facing my bedroom window. I peered at it cautiously, wondering if he'd planted some sort of prank there.

"It's a surprise," he sang softly, obviously incredibly amused by the scenario.

"No," I replied, folding my arms defiantly as if he was actually there, watching me.

"All right, well then..." he drew out his words, sounding surprised, "you're missing out. Big time. I mean, who knows what could be lurking behind that window —"

"Dad, I am so not falling for —"

"I mean, do I know? Yeah. But do you? Nah, not so much."

"Dad."

"But then again, that's just the choice you've made. And I've got to respect that, even if it means you're missing out on something irrefutably astounding and unquestionably phenomenal —"

"Oh, come on! Dad, don't pull out the vocabulary card. That's not fair —"

"It saddens me to inform you of this, but Katie, my dear, *you* are a bromide."

I gasped, "I am not!" Mentally, I was wondering if he'd made up that word or if it actually existed. "I am not a *bromide*," I said again with more vehemence, "I am the farthest thing from a *bromide*," I continued, pulling a dictionary out from my bookshelf and flipping through it speedily, "if ever there was a person who was a *bromide*, it would not be me, for I am not a —"

My dad laughed at the other end, "You won't find it in the dictionary."

I scowled, "Fine, well then —" and stopped mid-sentence as I heard a loud honk outside. Furrowing my brow, I opened my mouth again, only to be stopped short again by another honk, this time sounding suspiciously as if it was coming from outside my window. Standing up slowly, I moved curiously towards my window, and pulled back the curtain in one swift move.

"You were saying?" he asked, as I suddenly caught sight of a very familiar red Honda Accord Euro, with my dad seated inside, grinning broadly.

I burst out laughing as I watched him wave at me comically. "Nice surprise, huh, Katie?"

"Best surprise," I giggled, "Give me five minutes and I'll be down."

"No need, I'm coming in. I have to talk to your mum about a few things. Take your time," he replied, stepping out of the car.

"A few things? What?" I asked, impatiently.

"Just need a few words with your mum. Okay, I'm gonna hang up now... because I'm here for goodness sake," he laughed loudly and then hung up.

I smiled to myself and skipped downstairs to welcome him. I reached the bottom of

the staircase just as Mark opened the door and my smile slowly crept away as I saw Mark's face turn livid.

"What are you doing here?" I heard Mark demand, and I instantly slowed my steps.

"I came to get Katie... look, Mark, it doesn't have to be this way. It's...I...I miss you," my dad said gently, his cheerless eyes resting upon Mark's.

"This is the only way, Dad...Jack. Katie will be down in a few minutes. You can wait outside," he remarked gloomily, as he began to close the door.

"Wait! Mark, what do you think you're doing?" I asked angrily as I ran up to the front door, pushing Mark out of the way to allow my dad in.

Mark glowered at my dad as he coldly replied, "Don't let him get to you Katie," and stomped out of the room.

"Now, see, that's someone I'd call a bromide," I winked, "Don't let *him* get to *you*, okay?"

He laughed as he pulled me in for a tight hug, "I missed you so much, Kay."

"It was your own fault for staying in Morocco for six months," I joked, my voice muffled against his shirt.

"Architect Extraordinaire on the job," he grinned, holding me back to look at me. "You've grown."

"You say that every time you see me," I rolled my eyes.

"No, I mean it —"

"What's going on? I just saw Mark fuming in the living room," my mum inquired as she suddenly walked into the room, a look of surprise on her face as she noticed my dad.

"Oh, you're here early," she said, seating herself onto the sofa.

"Drama, Drama, Drama. Dad needs to talk to you."

"Yeah, there are a few things I need to discuss with you," he added, then taking in my inquisitive eyes, chuckled, "Privately."

"Oh sure, that's nice. Get rid of me already. I'll be in the living room," I sighed as I went off to question Mark on his strange behaviour.

I entered the room headstrong, a sharp retort on the tip of my tongue, but as I glanced at his face, I immediately held back. If his face hadn't looked so blank and empty, I would have demanded an explanation for the rude encounter he had had with my dad but the expression on his face just wouldn't allow me. There was a mixture of sorrow and regret etched on his face, but knowing him, his stubbornness and determination to 'always be right' would not push him to apologize. His eyes stared at the university applications he intended to fill in but hadn't started, and his hands were clasped tightly as if in pain. I turned my head towards the TV which I noticed now was on, Manchester United was as always in the lead and the Chelsea players seemed too out of the game to play well. I gently sat down and picked up the remote, flipping through the channels, one at a time. After a few minutes of restless impatience I switched it off and lay my head back, only to suddenly hear my mum's low angry voice, "No Jack, this is wrong. She'll flip. Why'd you have to do this? No wonder, Mark...Yeah? Well, you should have asked them first! How could you do this to them? After all that's happened..." Her frantic accusations grew louder as the seconds drew by. I held my breath, eager to eavesdrop on something more but only heard my father's low soothing voice and then nothing. I waited and waited, breathing as softly as possible just to hear a bit more, Mark too had lifted his head and was now curiously looking at me, as if to ask what I thought was going on. I shook my head at him in a 'how-should-I-know?' way and sighed, "Why aren't you talking to Dad?"

"None of your business," he replied, his face once more rigid and all the curiosity wiped away.

"It *is* my business. Dad's back after six months and you just blow him off? I have a right to know. So tell me, or I'll just squeeze it out of him." I'd had enough of all the glances my mum had been giving my brother recently, the way Mark wouldn't answer his calls, and now this?

"You do that." He had now gone back to his formal position and avoided my scowling eyes.

"I don't think there is a single brother alive who could be more infuriating than you," I said coldly and then left the room in a huff. Dad would explain everything, he usually did. As I got closer to the room, I noticed that the voices had died down and all was silent. My mum was standing in the kitchen making a cup of tea for herself as my dad shrugged on his coat.

"Oh. I was just coming to get you. Are you ready? We should be leaving now," my dad

said, attempting a smile that didn't reach his eyes. I scanned his face, but there was no trace whatsoever of the fact that he had a lot of explaining to do. I didn't know where to start.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Ready to hear what you have to say," I crossed my arms.

"Not now, Katie. I'll tell you in the car," he replied, averting my gaze and suddenly in a hurry to get out of the house.

I threw my hands in the air, "Fine then!" I went up to my mum, whose body was turned and gave her a quick hug. Sensing that something was still wrong, I whispered in her ear, "I'll be back by Monday. You think you can manage without me?"

"Haven't I always? Have a good time, love." She turned around and squeezed me happily, "You can come back whenever you want. Take care of yourself," she held me longer than usual, and I managed to notice her sudden reluctance to let me leave.

I looked at her curiously and then picking up my cream Guess bag, which I had packed earlier on, and turned to leave. My dad was waiting in the car and my mood suddenly shifted back to the situation on hand.

I slid into the car and turned to address my dad. "I want to know everything, don't leave a single thing out. And don't tell me it's none of my business because it is."

He started the car silently, and as we moved forward, he looked out of the window. After a pause he spoke, "This is tougher than I imagined. Are you sure you don't want me to tell you once we're home?"

"Now," I replied with a tone of finality.

"I'm Muslim."

At first, I thought I'd heard wrong and blinked a few times. I smiled slightly, expecting him to laugh at his idea of a joke. He didn't, and so I searched his face, my eyes darting here and there for any sign that he was joking. Not wanting to hear more and not wanting to believe him, I laughed nervously, "Sure, Dad."

"Sweetie, I'm being serious," he sighed, taking a quick look at my teasing smile that had now frozen as thoughts cluttered my mind. "My trip to Morocco didn't just help me with my work; I found a reason to live. At first, I thought the people there had such bizarre, outlandish customs, I mocked their religion. But slowly I realized it was the truth. It became so clear. I never really was a practicing Christian like your grandfather, so all

my life unknowingly I'd been searching for something. Something that had *meaning* because my life had none, something real... *the truth*. And Islam... *Islam is the truth*."

I dropped my gaze to my lap, "I don't believe you," I replied back hastily, whilst knowing in my mind that there was a certain level of sincerity I detected in his voice. I shut my eyes tightly as my mind screamed with fear, fear that he might not be joking, and fear that he really was a *Muslim*.

"Katie, we all have a place in this world, a reason we were put here. Life isn't random, it has *purpose*. I found mine. Look back two weeks honey, haven't you noticed anything?" he asked softly, brushing my hair back from my clammy forehead.

I wondered carelessly, sifting through my memories for everything that had just happened.

Dad gone.

Six months.

Morocco.

Islam.

Mark upset.

Mum worried.

Phone calls ignored.

A secret they all wanted to keep from me.

The pieces fit perfectly, and I shook my head in disbelief, my eyes misting rapidly as my lip trembled. *No! This can't be happening. It's got to be a joke! He wouldn't do this to me! No!*