



CHAPTER ONE

THE WORST BIRTHDAY E V E R

**T**he first couple of times Padar took me climbing, he'd always say something cheesy like *To be truly free, we must face the things that scare us.*

I'm not sure *freedom* is what I felt when he tripped over a tangle of rope and let me drop twenty feet before saving me from imminent death at the Go Vertical climbing gym.

I was only six then, so what did I know about metaphors anyway? Or gym rules, like *Parents shall not let go of rope when belaying child climber, otherwise risk being banned forever.*

It's safe to say we never went back there again. It's fine, though, because now I don't need my dad to belay me. Now I hold my *own* rope. And I haven't been afraid of falling since.

Which is good on a day like today. My fingers are crimped into the crack of a large boulder, my toes are wedged into a crevice, and there's nothing stopping me from plummeting to the ground except my own strength and expertly placed clips. I like to think that gravity and I are in a never-ending fight that I *always* win. I push myself higher and smile when I'm eye-level with the treetops. Up here, I can

imagine that impossible things could be real, like little flying pari with their wings fluttering in between leaves, or tricky forest spirits waiting for lost travelers to confuse. Or impressing barely-there dads.

I sneak a quick glance at the ground of Wissahickon Valley Park—one of my favorite places in Pennsylvania to climb. My dad and I have a birthday tradition to try different climbing spots (even though December can get pretty chilly, but I don't let a little wind and dry skin stop me). In between our yearly trips, I practice anywhere I can—up the side of my rowhome, dynoing between one fire escape and another, improving my grip strength by hanging off my school's roof by my fingers *and* toes (because you never know).

From up here, my dad resembles a burly ant with his thick brows pinched together (breaching into unibrow territory). He smiles encouragingly. I can't help but shyly grin back. I feel like a bottle of freshly shaken soda when my dad gets to see me climb. The excitement convinces me I can do anything.

*Get ready to be impressed, Padar.* I want to show him a trick I've been practicing since our last trip. I keep one hand on my rope and push out hard with my feet, so for a moment I'm flying like the mythical simurgh—the fabled Persian phoenix that's way cooler than regular phoenixes. I pretend I have wings and arc with the rope as it swings. The periwinkle sky shimmers around me while I wave at Padar. I swing around, ready to catch the rock when it nears again. Clumps of chalk flutter from my bag—and land directly on my dad's face.

“Sorry!” I frantically wave, causing more chalk to fall from my pouch. My body veers to the left, and I miss the catch. My shoulder crunches into the edge of the rock, causing little stars to dance in front of my eyes. “Oh no no *no*.” Something goes slack above me.

Suddenly, I don't feel as great as a mythical phoenix. To make the whole situation worse, Padar loses his grin. “Stop goofing around and focus, Farrah,” he chastises. “Remember our lessons! Check your rope and clips.”

The fizz I had goes completely flat. My cheeks are hot and sweaty. *Lessons.* My entire life was a lesson. I wish he could see past my mess-ups for once. I can imagine his voice now. *You're doing*

*awesome, Farrah. You've gotten so much stronger since last year. I wish I could see you more too.*

The last thought slips out before I get a chance to squash it.

*Get a grip, Farrah. I pump myself up. You're twelve now. No one needs their dad anymore at twelve.*

I climb higher, ignoring Padar's shouts to come back down. Climb, clip, climb, clip. The farther I go, the taller I feel, and the bad feelings fall away until there's nothing but sun and sky and air. My best friend and sister-in-crime, Arzu Ahmadi, thinks if I started a social media account to show off my doodles and calligraphy (with some ASMR sound effects), then Padar would be so impressed, he'd start coming around more often. *Nobody likes to feel like they're missing out!* she'd say, before jumping into a roundoff back handspring full twist.

Maybe she's right. If Padar could only see how much I can do now, things will change. I just know it. He'll stop hiding me. And maybe it'll be *me* getting on an airplane and visiting his house in Abu Dhabi.

I'm reaching up when a bird flies right at me with a piercing squawk.

"Don't let go!" Padar hollers, but it's too late.

I mess up my clip, and my rope gets super loose. The ache in my shoulder shoots up, and I lose my grip. I can't hold on—I start dropping fast. As I fall backward, the worst thing in all climbing history happens: my rope slips out of my clips, one by one by one.

Oh nooooooooooooooooooooo.

I scream as I tumble faster and faster. My hair slaps against my face as I plummet—ten, twenty, thirty feet and counting—to the ground. "Heeeeeeeelppppppppp!" I squeeze my eyes shut and start praying for the next five seconds. *I promise to do all my homework ahead of time. I'll help Madar clean up in the kitchen. I'll stop farting next to Baba Haji and blaming the smell on him—*

Someone must have been listening because the last clip holds, jerking me to a stop two feet above the ground. Stars dazzle in my eyes, and I feel like someone sucker punched my entire body. I unbuckle and collapse into the dirt, flat on my back, breathing a mile a minute.

“What were you *thinking*?” Padar’s angry face blocks out the sun. “Why don’t you ever listen to me? That was dangerous. Reckless. You could have gotten hurt. Or God forbid—”

The fizz is back when I jump to my feet, but this time it’s different. So much for being impressed.

“I’m fine. I’ve had worse falls.” Like that one time a fourth-story fire escape suddenly broke off midjump and I fell into a dumpster. “And I’ve never broken a bone from a fall.” *Or ever*, I want to say, but I keep that to myself because that’s pretty weird. I like to think it’s my special superpower, being indestructible (that is, if superpowers existed). It helps with getting through the tough stuff anyway, like having to deal with a disappointed dad. I wipe dirt from my pants and nervously tug on my ponytail. “Can I have my phone back, please?”

“You nearly smash into the ground, and the first thing you ask for is your phone?” Padar looks like he’s about to blow a gasket. “How about we discuss how you went past your limits!”

I bristle. “I practice in the gym all the time—”

“Apparently not enough to know you clipped in backward.”

Red alert. The warning signs are flashing little red and blue lights in my eyes, but I can’t stop it. The bubbles push the words right out of my mouth.

“How would you know what I can do when you’re never around?” I say loudly. “If you were here, you’d know I’m stronger than you think.” I stalk off. My favorite blue chalk bag crashes against my legs as I stumble up, up, up on the uneven path.

Padar outpaces me and catches me in his arms. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” He falters. His bushy brows crinkle together the way they always do when he’s about to say something unpleasant. “I wish I could change things, but you know the rules.”

*Rules.* Another word like *lessons*. I’d rather drink lemon juice mixed with unsweetened almond milk (or warm, week-old doogh) than hear another one. The glare of the sunset hides my frown. “I just don’t know why I have to be punished for something that’s not my fault.” I break away from his hug, even though I really don’t want to. “Anyway, we’re wasting daylight. We don’t have much time to get to the best part of the hike.”

Padar's relief is a little too obvious when I change the subject. He doesn't miss a beat and switches back to his annual updates on what's been going on with him. He's a judge in the UAE, so he doesn't really have that much free time. The same old *work never ends* and *time flies so fast* and *wish I knew the secret to slow it down* and *I promise things will be different when you're older and you know how it is*.

"Right." I kick rocks out of my way. "I know."

In my community, people like to keep it traditional. We don't like to stray from the OG way. So when Padar and Madar had me, a *harami*—an out-of-wedlock kid—when they were younger, well ... that just wasn't something good Muslims did.

Because of that, I've lived with Madar and my grandparents my whole life, which is fine, minus the old-people smell. And Padar was married off before I was born to someone who didn't break the rules, so we've lived separate since forever. I guess Padar's family is really into rules (which is probably where he gets it from), but sometimes I wonder if there was something *else* that happened the adults won't tell me. It's not like I'm saying this because I want anyone to feel sorry for me, though. I'm still lucky because I have Arzu, and she only lives ten blocks away, plus she's Muslim and Afghan American too. So she *gets* it.

And it's really not all that bad. I mean, at least I get to see Padar on my birthday. It could be worse. I could not get to see him at all.

"Can you stop looking like you've sucked on a lemon? Or do I need to tickle a smile out of you?" Padar creeps up from behind, and I dart out of the way just as he swipes for me. I can't help the grin that breaks across my face. Padar knows I can't resist a good challenge.

"Only if you can catch me first!" I take off, full speed, through the worn trail, keeping an ear out for the sound of Padar's laughs and stomping feet as I push vines and branches out of my face. For a second I pretend we're running from a small army of elves and I'm the one leading the way to safety. The burn in my legs encourages me to go faster, push harder until I finally reach the clearing and stop at the edge of a cliff.

"Beat you!" I throw my pack on the ground and whoop in triumph.

“That’s not fair. I’m the one carrying all our supplies.” Padar drops heaps of rope, shoes, and his own pack. He stretches out his back, twisting left and right. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“Didn’t anyone tell you, excuses aren’t a good look?” I tiptoe toward the ledge. The cliff juts fifteen feet over a massive drop. Wind hums in my ears and dances with my hair. The forest marches out, just begging us to come explore and discover all its whispering secrets.

The sun makes itself comfy on the horizon as it gets ready to switch places with the moon in preparation for the longest night of the year. Which means our day is almost done. I go home to Madar to finish Yalda night celebrations, and Padar just ... leaves for another three hundred and sixty-four days with his real family.

I hunch over and hug my knees to my chest. My stomach always starts to hurt when I think of the other half of Padar’s life. I wonder what it would be like to see what my dad’s *real* family looks like. What it would feel like to have a dad at home. Or to know if he had other kids besides me. No matter how hard I try, I can’t imagine it. It’s hard to picture a family you’ve never seen. And I don’t want to ask my dad if I do have any siblings in case he says *no* or *that’s not for you to know*.

“Figured we’d need something extra warm for the sunset.” Padar drapes a gray-and-white blanket around me. He sits and pulls me in. “I can’t believe Yalda night is here again.” The Night of Birth is the longest night of the year, where darkness roams for as long as it can. My grandmother likes to say it’s the night where magical jinn lurk in the shadows, waiting to create havoc and mischief. It’s also officially the start of winter. Even if it wasn’t my birthday, it’s still my favorite night of the year for this reason.

I lean into Padar’s shoulder and listen to the steady *whoosh* of his breathing and hang on tight. With my eyes screwed shut, I make myself *remember* this moment. Remember the way Padar always smells like vanilla and soap. Remember the way his left eye squints when he smiles. Remember the way it feels to have a dad. Even if it’s just for a day. And then I slip it away, into a tiny little box inside my head for safekeeping, so I can focus on the happy feelings instead of the sad.

“Maybe now is a good time for a picture.” Padar fiddles with my phone, angles it high, and says, “Paneer!” before snapping a photo. I laugh when his eyes cross. “Okay, less goofy one now.”

“Let me see.” I grab the phone from his hands and swipe through. “I need to approve it, you know? Make sure it’s good enough.”

“Yes, ma’am,” says Padar through a mock salute.

“It’s serious business. If you don’t take the right picture, how could anyone know we went hiking?” Not like I’d ever show anyone these photos (well, maybe Arzu, since she bugs me every time), but it’s important to make sure there’s one that’s just right. I erase all the mess-ups until there’s one perfect picture left. Padar and me, bathed in a dewy glow of golds and violets—the in-between of night and day. We look happy, like we have all the time in the world.

After a moment of gazing at the sunset, Padar asks, “Do you want to know why this night is so important?”

“Yes,” I say, because it’s the last part of our birthday tradition before we head back to the car. I already know the answer, but I still wait to hear it.

He holds me a little too tight when he says, “It’s the only night where we must feel the weight of darkness and fight against it, knowing light is waiting for us at the very end.” He hesitates and stares at the sky again, like he really doesn’t want to keep talking. His dark eyes mirror back the violets from the sunset. “Waiting for us to make the right choices.”

I nod and wait for the next part of his story. Padar usually goes on to tell me about mystical beings, creatures that exist beyond our wildest imaginations, like phoenixes and faeries and dragons and jinn made of smokeless fire, all living slightly out of our reach. Invisible to the human eye, but just as real as the light that warms my skin.

*Magic*, in the realest sense of the word. I’d never admit it to Arzu, but I’d like to think it’s all real.

“What do you know about fate?” Padar asks while fiddling with something in his pocket. The ground rumbles a little. A spark of lightning slashes the sky in half.

My face scrunches when a clap of thunder follows. “Like destiny?” I mean, I’ve heard those words thrown around a lot, especially during

Friday prayer at the masjid, but it's hard to focus when there's a storm coming. "Like things turn out the way they're supposed to?"

Padar smiles a sad little smile. "Something like that. All of us are bound by what is prewritten in our destinies. Everything that you are meant to be is predestined. From the moment you were born, fate has lived in you, has wrapped its threads around your heart, around all our hearts." At this, Padar looks even sadder.

I get a little sad too. Because if that's true, then that means we were always meant to live apart. ...

Padar grips a small box tightly in his hands. His knuckles turn white as he clears his throat. He blinks a little too fast. The purple glow hasn't left his eyes. Little shadows dance behind him. "Though what if I told you there was an item so powerful, it could break your threads of fate if you wished on it? A power long ago lost to the depths of the sea and drowned in an enchanted box." He drops the box into my hands. His voice gets strained. "Would you ... wish on it?"

"I thought we didn't do birthday gifts." I shake the box (a little too aggressively). There's no latch or keyhole to open it, but I feel a buzzing in my fingers and head, like a whisper or a voice. "How do I get it open?" I try prying the lid with my fingers, but nothing works. Something tinkles softly inside.

"Don't ... focus on that," Padar says with a pained look on his face. "Don't ... think about it." Padar shakes his head, like he's changing his mind. "Don't—" Padar gets tongue-tied and stands up abruptly. I've never seen my dad have a hard time expressing himself before. Normally, it's hard to get him to *stop* lecturing. A light rain sprinkles on us. "I should get you home before your mother worries." He starts to pack our belongings while muttering to himself.

I look at the box in my hands and wonder if he's acting so weird because of the gift. Maybe he didn't want to give it to me, or maybe he felt he had to. My stomach twists, and I find my heart wishing I had the guts to ask why this was bothering him so much. If the day didn't have to end, maybe I could try to ask why he never sticks around, why he always has to go, why we can't do normal things like exchange gifts for birthdays without it feeling weird or forced.



*Maybe it doesn't have to, a little whisper, like static, rumbles in my head. If that is your heart's truest request.*

A louder, more furious crack of thunder shakes the sky just as the box opens. Lightning follows. The rain is falling heavier now as I finally get to see what was hidden inside: a glowing golden ring. My eyes get as round as coins. I gasp.

"Do you see this?" I call to Padar, who is too busy throwing packs on his back to get out of the rain. The soft glow from the ring lights up my face. I can't help but stare. How is it glowing?

"The lightning? Yeah, looks like it's going to be a bad storm. We should get out of here."

*But that's not what you want, is it?* The voice startles me. It sounds like it's coming from the ring, but that can't be. So then why do I feel something pulling at my heart as I hold the ring tight to my chest, squeeze my eyes shut, and wish for one of Padar's stories to be true?

"If this isn't just some silly bedtime story," I whisper with all my heart, "then I wish to be hidden no longer. I wish to find a place in Padar's world. I wish my fate to be rewritten."

Nothing happens.

"Please," I add, just in case. The blanket clings to me like wet plastic wrap as a bright bolt of light illuminates the sky.

Padar jumps back in shock and finally looks at me. When he sees the ring in my hands, he looks like he's woken up from a long dream.

*A wish is a wish is a wish, the whisper roars loud in my head. And now your fate is mine.*

Light erupts from the ring as it swirls around me, louder than the storm. The rain comes down in sheets. Harder. Little bolts of lightning crackle, pinching my arms and legs. It really hurts. "Padar! Help, what's happening?" I run and try to get away from the energy around me, but it ties itself tighter around my arms and legs.

"Farrah, what have you done?!" Padar runs toward me and jumps head-on into the swirl of energy. Bright flashes of blue and silver whirl around us. Thunder echoes from his roar as his tanned skin glows blue. I gasp in shock.

In an instant, Padar changes. His torso grows bigger, his teeth sharper, like a vision from a nightmare. "What was your wish?" He is

frantic as he rips the ring from my hands, but I can't move, can't compute what I'm seeing. "Farrah, snap out of it. What did you—"

"What is happening to you? What is going on? Why are you blue?!" I scream, my body now free to move. The figure, who I *think* is my dad, is fighting against the swirl of energy erupting from the ring. Waves of thunder roll off him as light from the ring swirls faster and faster, but Padar doesn't even look *scared*.

Unfortunately, I'm scared for the both of us because I can barely even recognize Padar. He turns to me, the whites of his eyes glowing purple. "Run now. Get out of here before he gets you too," his voice booms, loud and deep, like it's coming from every direction. It shakes the cliff and sends me flying backward. I get an awful feeling in my stomach as I cover my head with my arms.

"Padar, just let go of the ring. It's doing something strange to you," I yell, because that has to be it, right? "Drop it and we can get out of here!"

Impossibly, two things happen at once.

A boy with milky white eyes and hair appears in front of Padar. The boy gasps in surprise, like he's just woken up from a nap.

And a cyclone wraps around them both. Padar's clothes thrash against his body as he shouts something at the boy. The boy's eyes lock on mine for a second. His mouth puckers like he's just eaten something sour.

I try to get a better look, but I blink and he's gone. Finally, a light bursts from Padar's chest as he crumples to the ground.

*No.*

I run over to him, falling on my hands and knees. His shirt is torn, exposing his blue skin, and there are so many silver scars that resemble lightning bolts trailing from his arms to his chest. For a second I'm too afraid to touch my dad—too afraid to allow whatever changed him to change me. But then I see my phone sprawled on the ground, with our photo staring back at me, and I snap out of it.

"Padar, wake up. Padar. Open your eyes." His eyes stay closed. I have to fix this. Somehow. My training from Girl Scouts kicks in, and I call 911. I hold on to him, tears leaking from my eyes. "I take it back. I take it all back. Just please wake up."

He doesn't. Instead, the scars on his body burn bright—so bright—but I don't let go of him, because I'm scared of what it means if I do. As the glow starts to dim, so does Padar, until the unthinkable happens.

He vanishes, like dust through my fingers.

The wind slows, and starlight catches on the ring next to my phone. The ring shimmers one last time, and when the light fades, I notice there are now seven gems embedded in the gold.

Only one gem glows.

Only one whisper remains.

*One fate for another,* it says in my head. *Your wish has been granted.*