

Chapter 1

Adam

I had never hit anyone first before hitting that boy with the smug, half-lidded eyes. I hit hard enough that his head jerked to the side and blood leaked from his nose like a faucet. In my defense, it had *felt* like he hit first, because of what he'd said about Dad. If I'd taken a moment to consider it, I wouldn't have done it, but that time was already past.

Edel, naturally, was horrified by what I'd done. Edel was the one who pulled me off the other boy, who was swinging back at me. Edel, my big brother, with his skinny face, those sad brown eyes the girls loved, yanked me away with so much force I thought there must be two of him. Then, he scrunched up those same eyes in anger against me.

He was my ride home, so Edel was there already, with his beat-up Toyota, to pick me up from our outdoor neighborhood gym, pack me into the passenger's seat, and take off, all the while, shouting "Stupid, stupid," while I protested that nothing had happened, really.

I told him it was all right and I didn't feel a thing, not until we were a block away anyway, and my head started pounding, and my knuckles felt like they'd been rubbed across sandpaper. Then I pulled down the mirror and saw my cut lip and bruised cheek. And I remembered the other boy's head jerking to the side, tears of surprise in his eyes.

On the radio, a British voice was giving an interview. "The United Kingdom is deeply concerned by the events that took place yesterday at the American University and the tragic loss of life among demonstrators and security forces. The UK government expresses its condolences and calls on all sides to maintain calm and stability."

"All sides? Goddamn their concern," I said. The government's side had guns, and the

students only had rocks to defend themselves.

Edel put his hand on my shoulder, slowly, like I was a wild animal. Maybe I was. And when I didn't lash out, he let it rest on there.

Then, just before we hit Rock Creek Park, a police car pulled us over. Edel almost never sped. I held my breath as our car slowed to a stop. An officer approached Edel's window, his eyes hidden behind reflective sunglasses.

A family of four walking along the sidewalk slowed as they passed. The woman wore a long dress and shot us a look of sympathy. Probably one of those fundamentalists who made me almost as nervous as the government. Pouring out of churches, those Sunday rallies in the city.

Edel rolled down the window while I watched frozen from the passenger's side. I massaged my aching fingers, careful not to touch my purple, bleeding knuckles. The smell of exhaust poured into the car. The air was so thick with dust and fumes you could almost chew it. There was a time I could remember when a routine stop wouldn't faze us. Now, despite the sweltering day, a shiver ran through me.

"License, registration, now," the man said. His voice was like an angry school teacher's. On the front of his jacket, he wore an insignia of the American flag.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Edel reached into the glove compartment and handed some papers to the man. I watched Edel tap his skinny, nervous fingers on the steering wheel.

"What's that? Give me that too," the officer said when he saw Edel's camera at my feet. I hesitated, and then when Edel nodded, passed it to the officer, who turned it around dumbly until Edel showed him how to view the pictures digitally.

The man lifted his sunglasses. His hazel eyes flitted from the camera in his hands to Edel's wrist. He had deep frown lines, a wide nose, and a scar that ran from his temple to his

plump lips.

“Nice watch. Gold?” Then he looked closer. “Oh, it’s cracked. A junk watch.” He laughed at his joke.

“It’s our father’s,” Edel said. “He’s missing. Since yesterday” His voice strained. He wiped the watch with the edge of his sleeve. “May I ask why you stopped us?”

“Better to be missing or dead than to be a traitor, isn’t it?”

The word “dead” made the hair on my arms stand up. Edel had insisted Dad was only missing, and I believed him. Dad wasn’t a traitor either. He was an English professor at the American University, where I had gone to college, a big man with salt and pepper gray hair he’d grown down to his shoulders like a hippie. And he’d believed in the students who had chanted for democracy, right up until armed police stormed the campus and he disappeared.

I was there at the protests too. Not for any reason but because Dad was and thought I might want to see it. Of course, he hadn’t known what would happen. So I was there too when police had killed dozens of students, and countless more were wounded, lying in pools of blood. But sitting in the hot, stopped car, I knew better than to speak up.

A bus crammed with passengers sped by us, rocking the car a little in its wake, and refilling the air with exhaust. The man handed Edel’s documents back to him. His face was like a prowling animal’s. “Edel Joseph,” he said. “And this must be Adam?”

I felt a rush of fear, my face flushed, and his heart beat hard. The man hadn’t seen any ID, but he knew my name already. He looked me over. I watched him take in my face, my deep-set eyes, the beginnings of a beard.

“You should do something else,” the man said to Edel. “Journalists are mostly liars.”

Edel gave a weak smile. He was a terrible actor. “Do you know what happened to our

father?” Edel asked.

The officer looked up to the sky. “Should I tell you the truth?” His hair was uncombed, giving him a wild look. “No, you people can’t be trusted. If I tell you he’s dead, you’ll think we’re brutes and try to fight us. If I say he’s only missing, you’ll think we’re weak.”

“We would never think that.”

The officer registered Edel’s face. “I think it would be better for you to wonder.” He continued flipping through pictures. “This one,” he said, sounding like he had found a treasure. “It’s in front of a government building. You know that’s against the law. I have to delete it.”

“Please let me,” Edel said, stretching his hands forward.

“On second thought, I’ll keep it,” the man said, tucking the camera into his jacket pocket. Then he spotted a notebook next to Edel and took that too.

“You’re taking everything.” Edel turned pale.

“So I am.” The man adjusted his jacket and straightened his collar. I saw, just below the pocket, the security forces’ motto: “In the service of the people.”

Then the man leaned his head in the window and asked in a low voice, “You like fighting, Adam?”

I shook my head.

“You fight fair, or are you a little shit who hits first?”

I felt beads of sweat on my forehead. I could hardly breathe. How could this man know already what I’d done? Was he following me?

“Are we being detained?” Edel asked.

“That depends,” the man said drawing out the last word. “On how I feel today.” He fixed his hazel eyes back on me and turned up the corner of his mouth. In another life, he could have

been almost charming.

“Come out, Adam.”

I stepped out of the old Toyota, crossed in front of the hood, and stood next to the officer, shaking the entire time. I sized up the man the way I had that boy. I could fight him maybe. But I wouldn't win. The man was thick, with arm muscles that rippled like ropes.

He opened the driver's side door a crack. “Put your hand here, Edel.” The blood drained from Edel's face.

“Please, no,” I said. But I couldn't look Edel in the eye. Not when all of this was my fault. After a moment, Edel stuck his left hand through the crack of the open door.

“Slam the door, Adam,” the man said, pulling a baton from his belt.

“Adam, just do it.” Edel said through gritted teeth. I couldn't move. “Do it!”

“Hard,” the man said. I began to sweat and choke. Tears streamed down my cheeks. The man raised the baton, lifted it over his head, ready to swing. I slammed the door on my brother.

When I was just a boy, I had once come across some older neighborhood boys playing with a toad. I'd wanted desperately to join them, and they'd told me to stomp on it with my bare foot, crushing it. I did it. It hadn't squashed immediately. Its bones had resisted with a toughness I never expected and then finally crackled under my feet. After the boys left, I had wept over its little body. I thought of it as my brother's bones cracked.

I screamed. The man opened the door again and examined Edel's red, twisted fingers. Edel too howled.

“I knew you were a coward,” the man said. Then he leaned toward me and whispered, “I know the boy you assaulted.”

I hadn't known the boy was anyone important. I would never purposely have gone after

someone connected to the security forces. But I should have known the boy's family was important, should have seen it in his swagger, his arrogance. I was stupid and naïve to think I could ever stand up to a boy like that. Edel was right. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

“Your turn,” the man said to me. He dragged me to the hood of the car. His thick arm flew back and in one quick motion struck the side of my head. He followed it with a blow to my stomach that dropped me onto the hood of the car. My head swung wildly and crashed into the windshield. I lay there, stunned.

I returned to my seat, sobbing. And in the corner of the windshield, right where my head hit it, was a small indentation with cracks around it, a tiny spider web.

When the officer returned to the car, I guided Edel out and to the passenger seat, much as he'd done for me after the fight, and took the wheel. “Are you all right?” I cried. “Edel!” Coward that I was, I couldn't make myself look at his hand.

“Yes.”

“You must hate me,” I whispered.

Edel turned toward. “No,” he said. His eyes watered. “They want to divide us. Just drive me to the hospital. And don't tell Laila. I'll tell her myself.”

I promised Edel I wouldn't trouble his wife with the worst details of what had happened. I saw my shirt was smudged. Blood ran from my nose now in a steady stream, the way that boy's had. Edel handed me a tissue from the glove compartment with his good hand, but I waved it away and wiped my face with his sleeve, leaving red streaks.

“You'd better get to the hospital,” I said. He would be all right, but Edel's fingers were swollen and turning deep purple.

It looked like it hurt him to talk. He was heaving, gasping. “I—would've—been stopped

sooner or later.

“You believe that?” I remembered now how careful Edel had been with his interviews. He hadn’t written the students’ names. He’d barely taken notes at all.

I stared at my brother for a moment, remembering something. “You really knew we might get pulled over?”

“Look—under.” Edel, clutching one hand with his other pointed with his elbow to the center console with the cigarettes. “I—always keep a hiding place.”

At a stoplight, I moved several packs of cigarettes into his lap, revealing the bottom of the console. And there was the tiniest of latches. I pulled it loose, revealing a false bottom, and underneath was a small digital camera. “A friend,” Edel said, wincing with every word. “Put it in. Dad’s—old—student.”

“You have two cameras?”

He nodded. “The other—barely worked.”

I turned on the camera. I flipped through photo after photo of students running from teargas and riot police, students in street clothes, completely unprepared, without even masks to cover their faces, and white puffy clouds of tear gas billowing behind them.

I stared at my brother in disbelief.

“I was there—reporting. And I’m going to—find out—what happened to Dad.”

Then he snatched the camera from me and put it back. I didn’t want to bother him with any more questions so I replayed it all again in my mind. The cold, reflective sunglasses, the way the man’s hazel eyes had fixed on us. The slamming car door. Edel’s fingers. How I’d hit the windshield. The crack.

We passed a bread vendor and a sidewalk cafe filled with men standing around. In five

minutes, we were at the Sibley Hospital emergency entrance. Trash bags littered the sidewalks. I parked, got out of the car first, crossing over to Edel's side to guide him out. Through the cracked windshield, my brother's face fractured into a million pieces

