

**COME
HOME**

CHAPTER ONE

PHILADELPHIA

SUNDAY, JANUARY 9, 2011

TODAY, AT ONE p.m., as he did every Sunday, Ahmed Masud called his family at their home in Giza—Egypt’s third largest city—yet mapped as part of metropolitan Cairo. This ritual had not changed since his arrival in the United States fifteen years ago as a surgical resident. His parents, now in their seventies, his older sister, older brother and his younger sister would be sitting around the travertine marble table in the library. Each was a distinctive voice on the speaker phone. His kid brother also could be clearly heard, conferenced in from his Brussels mansion, the European strategic outpost for Masud interests.

The call did not include any spouses of the five Masud siblings. The agenda, almost always strictly business—the family’s textile mega conglomerate. Rarely would they digress to include a family milestone or accomplishment. Ahmed contributed little to these calls, and over the years, considered them an annoying intrusion into his thriving all-American life. But after the twin towers fell and Americans’ casual curiosity about Arab men became noticeably hostile, he began to appreciate the weekly family connection. But he had no interest in Egyptian politics—today’s main topic—nor the dreary financial details of the fabric industry. For him, the cushy niche of a prosperous

Philadelphia plastic surgeon had been everything he'd dreamed—until recently.

Ahmed rolled his chair farther back from his custom-designed home-office desk, distancing the loud, angry voice of his elder brother, Jafari, their father's successor in all Masud business affairs—patriarch-to-be. Jafari's abrupt directive came in Arabic—"With or without your American wife—book your flight home. We need to consolidate family resources. We need you to help move assets out of Egypt before it's too late."

"Ahmed—" his older sister Merit broke in—gutsy for an Egyptian woman, even an upper class one—"How can you ignore what's going on! Forces are building against us. A full-on Mubarak rebellion is in play—"

His father interrupted, "If Mubarak goes down, we go with him."

"Father, you're being melodramatic," said Neema, Ahmed's younger sister.

"You shut up." Jafari shouted. "What do you know about what's going on in Egypt! All you do all day is read poetry. Do you even know what's happening in Tunisia? That bullshit story of the kid there who set himself on fire."

Ahmed had heard about Bouaziza, the twenty-six-year-old street vendor who'd set himself on fire to protest police brutality. Today's *New York Times* had a followup. Something about a major strike, demanding an end to police brutality—good luck with that. Followed by mass arrests of activists, bloggers, copy-cat protesters . . . but that's Tunisia.

"That street vendor story is playing big in Europe," Ahmed's brother Seth put in from his Brussels vantage point. "International Federation for Human Rights in Paris—major pressure on Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Word here is, he'll resign."

Who —? Ben Ali must be the Tunisian President, Ahmed figured. He'd only skimmed the article.

“I understand about Mubarak, how tied-in the family is to him, but—”

Ahmed,” his father’s voice sounded much smaller than usual, “you said yourself you face discrimination in America. Now is *the time*. We need you back here, now. Bring your son. Leave your wife. Or bring her—”

“If you can keep her under control,” Jafari added. “We have no time to waste on her. The climate in Egypt is getting ugly, and—”

“Ahmed, my dear child,” his mother inserted, “please, bring little Wati to me soon. I want to see for myself that he’s learning the Quran. And fluent in Arabic. Last time I talked to him, he understood so little—”

“What about Seth?” Ahmed objected. “Does he have to come home too?”

“No,” said Seth, from his Brussels home, “I need to be *here* to make our investment moves and manage our European markets. The International Cotton Association is even more important now.”

“So you’re telling me to give up everything I’ve created? Is this right, Father?”

“Get back to Egypt,” his father repeated, his voice stronger now. “*With your son.*”

The call disconnected.

* * *

Sunday’s dinner table discussion had become heated, confrontational. “Let’s put this on hold,” Nicole suggested.

“Since when do you tell me when and where I can speak?” Ahmed slammed down his glass, splashing water onto the table cloth. Why was her husband so upset? He’d been simmering ever since that afternoon family call.

Nicole saw Alex's little flinch. Just what she'd wanted to avoid.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" Alex was five-years-old. One of those kids who tried to avoid conflict, mediate differences. A peacemaker, not a troublemaker.

"Son, this is between your mother and me," Ahmed said, his tone slightly softer.

"But you are talking about me . . . and my school. "Why are you so mad?" Alex put his slice of pizza back down on his plate.

"Yes. Your mother and I were discussing you," Ahmed said. "I was telling Mommy that you need to go to an Islamic school. You're a Muslim."

Nicole felt the acid rise up from her stomach. When she and the brilliant, handsome young Egyptian fell in love, and despite both their families' serious reservations, married, this was the direction they'd agreed never to take. She a less-than-devout Catholic; he, a Muslim of record, but who claimed no interest in religion.

But after Alex was born, Nicole and Ahmed had argued about the ethnicity of his name. She'd won that one—Alexander—conceding his second name to Arabic—Wati—which means rebel in Egyptian. Made sense, as Ahmed had been the rebel in his family. Ahmed had voiced no objection to Alexander Wati's ritual Catholic baptism, an affair attended by Nicole's large family. Adding up wins and losses, Nicole also had won on the maiden name front. Nicole remained Nicole Nelson, not Nicole Masud or even a hyphenated Nelson-Masud.

"Yes, Daddy. I know, but I'm a Catholic, too. Mommy says—"

"Enough of what your mother says. We're sending you to the mosque and that's final. Nicole, you set it up. You're the mother. That's it. Register him as Wati, not Alexander."

Nicole tried to gauge when this religious concern had surfaced. What had triggered it? Had she been so busy trying to balance her

career and family she'd overlooked some kind of sea change in her husband? Or had she just been preoccupied by her son starting school? Public school, not the Catholic school she would have preferred.

"Archy, we can discuss this *later*." She tilted her head slightly in her son's direction. They needed to give it a rest, at least until Alex was out of earshot.

Ahmed's hospital ring tone undermined whatever retort he'd planned, but he did manage, "Do not. I repeat. Do not call me 'Archy'. I don't have to tolerate that ridiculous name your brothers stuck on me. My name is A-h-m-e-d—pronounced Ack-med."

For eight years now, she'd called him Archy. All his friends called him Arch. Why this revolution?

"Okay." Nicole said. "No more Archy." She'd have to process this later, but not now . . . let it go . . .

"Dr. Masud," he answered, distracted, still sitting at the table, still glaring at her.

Nicole saw Ahmed's face twist in annoyance.

"Levaquin. 750 milligrams. IV. And get the patient up and moving. Keeping her in bed just invites pneumonia."

With clenched teeth, Ahmed listened impatiently.

"No. I can't come in. It's Sunday night. And before you ask, neither can Dr. Nelson. Once you get that antibiotic running, the patient will be fine."

Nicole raised her eyebrows, an invitation for her husband-partner to share the patient's status. This had to be the overweight woman he'd operated on Friday. The woman was a repeat customer; one with body-image dissatisfaction who couldn't survive a twenty-four-month period without "work" on her face. Against Nicole's advice, Ahmed had agreed to do yet another face lift, the patient's fourth. She'd make a great candidate for abdominal liposuction, but she

was obsessed with facial sagging. And now, it seemed clear, she had pneumonia. *Please, God, don't let this become another lawsuit.*

Nicole and Ahmed had met during their year in cranio-facial surgical training at the University of Pennsylvania. Nicole's medical training and plastic surgery residency had been exclusively at the University of Pennsylvania; Ahmed had graduated from Cairo University's Kasr Al-Ainy Faculty of Medicine before moving to Philadelphia for plastic surgery training at Temple University. Then, to a coveted fellowship at Penn's cranio-facial program—where Nicole also was a fellow. Over the last nine years, eight as husband and wife, they'd been inseparable, enthusiastically sharing everything from their bed to their plastic surgery joint practice. Until now. What had happened to her affable, fun-loving husband? How was she to deal with this total stranger?

Ahmed focused intently on his poached salmon. Nicole let him chill out as she tried to fathom the cause of this hostility. Could there have been an ethnic slight? Nine years had passed since September 11th, 2001, but anti-Arab prejudice persisted. Ahmed had gone back to his dinner; Alex back to his pizza. But Nicole just pushed back her plate, sipped her sparkling water, endured the silence.

* * *

So much for their typical, relaxed Sunday evenings, watching TV, reading a book. She'd amassed a collection of mysteries; he preferred nonfiction, usually biographies of historical figures. But there'd be no such togetherness tonight. Ahmed took Alex upstairs to play with Legos while Nicole cleaned up the kitchen. On week nights, Anna, the Masuds' housekeeper/nanny would take over, but on weekends either they ate out or Nicole, despite her lack of culinary skills, managed dinner.

At seven thirty, Alex's bedtime, Nicole went upstairs to the playroom. She suggested that Alex take a bath, promised she would read to him, as she always did—and they were just getting to an exciting part of the latest *Goosebumps* story.

“Kiss Daddy goodnight—”

“I'll handle my son,” Ahmed said. “I will put him to bed when I am ready. Alex, put more small pieces on that stack.” Ahmed pointed to the edge of the design they were constructing.

“That's okay, Daddy. I have school tomorrow. I'll go to bed like Mommy says.”

So like Alex. Craving peace and concord. Doing, saying what he thought would promote tranquility.

“Nicole, get the fuck out of here.”

The venom in Ahmed's voice frightened her and would terrify Alex. Since day one, they had agreed never to raise their voices, never to use obscenities in front of their child.

Over the recent few months, she'd worried about Ahmed's reaction to the malpractice lawsuits that had been filed. An obvious attack on his professional competence, a blow to any surgeon's ego. Had they undermined his self-image? Reversed fifteen years of American-style confidence? Was that the cause of this outburst?

If so, what could she do? How should she react to this new confrontational attitude?

To his friends and colleagues, Ahmed was as Western as the next guy, but Nicole knew better. Her husband's ethnicity was imprinted on his soul. Before she married Ahmed, her parents had tried to tell her the cultural differences could recede—but would remain. Despite these well-intended warnings, she and Ahmed had sailed along on a sea of love and mutual respect. Their relationship had only strengthened after parenthood, deepened by dedication to their son.

Until now. Had she been in denial? Well, now she was alarmed.

Nicole left her son to his father. She did not want to escalate the tension. Ahmed was perfectly capable of putting Alex to bed. In their surgical partnership, she and her husband covered for each other at the hospital on a rotational schedule. If Nicole was called in, Ahmed took care of Alex. She waited in their bed, trying to read a novel. As the clock moved past ten, Nicole decided to check on them.

She found Alex curled up in his bed, in fresh pajamas, sound asleep. Should she look for Archy? *Stop. Don't call him that, not even in your head.* He used to love the Americanized nickname. Yes, something had definitely changed with Ahmed. Why had she ignored whatever had been festering in him?

Even though the lights were out, she poked her head in his office across the hall from their room. Ahmed was not there. She went back into her closet and pulled on a terrycloth robe before heading downstairs. The voice in her head said, "Leave him alone." But she couldn't. If she could just understand the problem . . .

She found Ahmed sprawled on the sofa in the library, an alcove off the family room. Shoes off, still in the khakis and the long sleeve polo shirt he'd worn all day. The fire he'd made in the family room fireplace earlier still had warm embers, the pine-y scent wafting throughout the downstairs. No lights on. No music.

"Ahmed, can we talk?" Nicole asked softly.

Only a groan for an answer, but Ahmed did sit up, swept his jet-black hair off his forehead with slender, delicate fingers. He was trim, but muscular and well-toned; all the stereotypically masculine elements of his body contrasted with his hands. Hands as delicate as his were unusual, even for a plastic surgeon.

"Talk about what?" he said, leaning forward, shoulders hunched.

Nicole stepped into the room, crossed it, and tossed aside a decorative pillow so she could sit beside him. “About what’s going on, Ahmed.”

“Nothing. Go back to bed.”

Nicole reached over to massage his shoulders, something she did when he was upset. “So why did you use the f-word in front of Alex. We’ve always said that we don’t want him to hear that language while he’s so young.”

The tension in Ahmed’s shoulder muscles seemed to diminish just slightly. He remained silent. Nothing unusual. Nicole attributed Ahmed’s discomfort with touchy-feely conversations to the basic culture of Arab men. She envied her sister and her sister-in-law’s uninhibited discussions of emotionally laden issues with their husbands. With Ahmed, there could be no introspection, no *relationship* topics. She loved him; he loved her. Secure in that reality, she’d never indulged in resentment, never challenged him.

To Ahmed, the world was black and white. They would do this or do that. To ask how he *felt* about a situation was a waste of breath. “What do you mean *feel*?” he’d ask. The question not sarcastic, but sincere. Arab men did not talk about feelings. Not so, their son though. Alex was a sensitive boy. So far, Ahmed had tolerated what he perceived as weak in the child, but . . .

“Stop protecting the boy, Nicole. He must be raised as a man.”

“But let’s keep our language age-appropriate,” Nicole said, inching her rhythmic *masseuse* squeezes up to his neck. “Okay?”

Maybe this is what they needed. Just the two of them sitting in the dim light, discussing their child. A married couple dealing with built-up tension.

“I’m serious about you enrolling him in the mosque school. The Foundation of Islamic Education in Villanova, to be specific. Wati

will learn the Quran. He'll learn Arabic, begin to appreciate what it's like to be a Muslim."

"But—"

"I know what you're going to say: I let him be baptized a Catholic. Well, he was a baby then. Now, he's in school. It's time."

Nicole's right hand had left Ahmed's neck to tightly clasp the left in her lap.

"Ahmed"—she'd almost said Archy—"remember what we said before we decided to have a child. How we'd never let our two religions drive a wedge between us. I really do appreciate that you agreed to Alex's baptism. But we did enroll him in the public school rather than the Catholic one."

"And now you're going to enroll him in the school at the mosque."

Nicole wasn't sure how to respond. She said nothing, just tightened the sash of her robe and stood. When she and Ahmed had married, she'd had nothing against Islam, but now that she'd spent time in Egypt and had seen first hand the denigration of women, the spreading fanaticism, she didn't want her son exposed to that radical ideology.

Ahmed reached for her hand, gave it a gentle tug, pulled her back to him. If she sat back down, he'd just keep pressing his agenda on her. She needed time to come up with a response that stood a chance of changing his mind. Spontaneously—she didn't plan it, a mere reflex—she pulled her arm away from him. She turned to leave. *Best not to say anything inflammatory.*

"Where do you think you're going?" Ahmed stood up fast, and grabbing her shoulders, twisted her around to face him. His eyes met hers—sending a dark message. "Tell me," he demanded, "tell me you *will* obey."

Obey? They'd taken that out of the wedding vows they had recited at their Catholic marriage ceremony in Philadelphia. Bet it was still in the Egyptian script, though.

"I'm going to bed," Nicole announced.

That's when she felt the sting of his slap on her cheek. Ahmed had hit her! Nicole grabbed his arm more to steady herself than to stave off another strike.

"Bitch," he seethed. "You're like all the bitches I see every day. Demanding narcissists!"

He pulled his arm out of her grasp and hit her again, this time the blow landed lower, smashing her lips against her teeth. She tasted blood before she felt it dripping onto her white robe. Ahmed had never hit her, never laid a hand on her in anger. What had gone so wrong?

Nicole's hand went to her mouth as Ahmed shoved her back down onto the cushions.

"*Stop*," she managed before he hit her again, this time a punch that landed solid on her right eye socket.

Anything she said would antagonize him so Nicole shrank into the sofa, silent.

"You know what this is about, don't you? How could you not? I got sued twice in the last month. And I have two pending suits. You? You have none. When those fat ugly bitches don't end up looking like *you*, they sue *me*. Don't we hear this every week in our practice? 'Dr. Masud, just make me look as beautiful as your wife?' Don't bother denying it. The last one wanted three million dollars because her goddamn lips weren't lined up like yours."

Ahmed stood over her, his voice growing louder, and sing-songy, like his English when they first met.

“Ahmed—”

So, this was what had set him off. Not Alex’s education. Ahmed was just using that as a weapon to get back at her. Facts, Nicole reminded herself. Ahmed had several cases that went bad. Maybe in Egypt, he wouldn’t get sued, but this was America. Their malpractice insurance premiums had doubled. All plastic surgeons’ insurance policies were extravagant, but with Ahmed’s record, theirs had gone through the roof. Money was no object for the Masuds, but still . . . No, it wasn’t the money, it was the shame. Ahmed needed to be adored, not dragged publicly through the malpractice courts.

“You will be just fine,” was all Nicole could think of to say. *He hit me!* She’d never been hit by a man. Never. And Archy—always the gentleman— She needed to strike back. But not here. Not now.

Nicole stayed where she was, pressing the sleeve of her robe against her bleeding mouth. Ahmed stalked out of the room, muttering, “I’m no longer wanted in this country.” At least, that’s what she thought she heard him say. Then he headed for the stairs.

She heard a door slam. Coming from the left, the guest bedroom. What choice did she have but go upstairs, wash and disinfect her bloody face, change into a clean nightgown, and try to sleep. Tomorrow they’d both be back into their routine. Early morning surgery for both. Afternoon office hours. Normal. But could there ever be *normal* again? Her husband had actually struck her in the face.

CHAPTER TWO

NATALIE NELSON WANTED her stepdaughter to have her dream wedding. Natalie and her husband Rob Johnson spent that January Sunday evening going over tentative plans for Rob's daughter Leslie's June wedding. She was twenty-five years old, a photographer's assistant, engaged to a high school football coach. Since her mother's untimely death when Leslie was seventeen years old, Rob had raised his only child, doing great as a single parent until he and Natalie married eight years ago. Leslie had been seventeen then, about to leave for college, so Natalie never had a chance to feel like a real mother, but she and Leslie got along just fine.

The problem was—and was *not*—money.

Sitting across the kitchen table from her husband, Natalie saw the fatigue that detracted from Rob's good looks. The emotional drain based on major financial concern. The wedding numbers were adding up: dress, cake, music, flowers, full course dinner at the Ritz-Carlton, countless other incidentals. Until three years ago, Rob's business flourished. No one could have predicted the nationwide meltdown of the new-home real estate business, even in Pennsylvania, far from the hardest-hit states.

Johnson Quality Homes was about to declare bankruptcy. The once eminent company founded by Rob's father in Montgomery County

just beyond the Philadelphia city line, was fighting for survival. Once Rob took over the business from his dad, he'd expanded into nearby Bucks County and on into New Jersey and Delaware. Under his management, Johnson Quality Homes had become the fourth largest privately held builder in Pennsylvania. With offices in Center City, Philadelphia, the business had thrived until 2008 when the Case-Shiller home price index saw the largest decrease in history. Building was at a standstill. Buyers walked away in droves from their contracts.

Natalie had just poured tea, a solution for distress she'd learned from her favorite British novelists. She set down Rob's mug in front of him on the kitchen table, firmly moving aside the stack of paper.

"Here, Rob, would you like a . . ." She tried to remember what she might have tucked away in the cupboard or refrigerator. Okay. Ice cream—butter pecan, Rob's favorite.

"Nothing for me," Rob said as he rubbed his forehead with both hands. "I always told her I wanted her to have a big wedding, but look at the costs. We've already committed to the Ritz with a down payment. She's picked out the dress, an expensive one, but we didn't tell her to keep costs down. She's not usually extravagant, but with this wedding, she is going overboard."

"Leslie doesn't realize how drastically the business has been hit," Natalie said.

"Every newspaper, every day," Rob responded. "You'd have to be living under a rock."

"You know she's never been financially in tune. She's into *photography*, darling. Other than the wedding, she's not asked us for much."

"So far the wedding expenses add up to ninety grand. I have suppliers I have to pay. Guys I owe, guys I need to pay, want to pay. God, Natalie, you know how this is tearing me up inside. My subs and suppliers trust me; they depend on me. Now I'm going to

leave them hanging as a part of this bankruptcy, and all while I'm planning an extravagant wedding for my daughter. That's morally wrong."

Natalie remained silent; Rob paused for a sip of tea and continued. "What can I do? I have to cut back on the wedding I promised her. No choice." Rob pushed back from the table.

Natalie thought he might call Leslie right there and then. She caught his solid forearm. "Yes, Rob, there is a way."

Rob turned to face her. "I know what you're going to say. And the answer is: no. I will not let you do this."

For the eight years of her marriage to Rob, he had insisted that they keep financially separate lives. *He* would be the provider, a macho arrangement she disliked, but not enough to hurt the dear guy who simply didn't get it.

Natalie earned a big salary, significant stock, and owned lots of stock options. Rob wouldn't allow her to touch any if it in the ordinary running of the household.

"Rob, you've cut every expense possible. You won't let me contribute a dime. I think we need a compromise here. Please, let me handle Leslie's wedding. She's the only daughter I will ever have. I really, really want to do this. You know it's not a matter of money for God's sake."

"The principle of the matter: I take care of my family. That's what men do. Once the real estate market gets going, we'll be just fine."

"But until then—"

"I've done everything possible to avoid Chapter 11. God knows the fastest way to get laughed out of a bank is to mention *real estate*." Rob picked up Leslie's wish list of wedding attendees. "Shit, how did a happy occasion like this send me into this frenzy of doom?"

"At least you like our son-in-law-to-be," Natalie said. "A jock. A guy who talks nonstop sports."

“If Leslie would just show up at the court house with him and a marriage license, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

Natalie stood, ruffled Rob’s steely-gray crew-cut, and announced, “I *am* putting myself in charge of this wedding. I’ll get Nicole to help me and that’s that, Rob.” As she gathered up the empty mugs, she turned to gauge her husband’s reaction. She saw what she wanted—a look of relief, maybe even gratitude.

As she rinsed the mugs, Natalie reflected on her relationship with her big, hunky husband. Rob was honest to a fault, he trusted her with every detail of his life—the good, the bad and the ugly—he respected her business acumen, and he supported her career. She’d been married to him for eight years—a month longer than her twin sister Nicole’s marriage to Ahmed. The twins had been thirty-four years old, first marriage for each.

Rob, a forty-four-year-old widower then, had a daughter about to leave for college. When friends had introduced Natalie and Rob, she had been a research scientist at Merck and getting her executive MBA at the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Business; Rob was an extremely successful home builder. Then came the real estate crash that’d peaked six years after their marriage. Everything that Rob had worked for had

by now fallen apart—to the point that Johnson Quality Homes had no reserves, no new building projects, a boatload of liabilities. A severe blow to her husband’s masculine ego. So far, he’d shown no obvious signs of depression, but Natalie watched and worried twenty-four-seven.

Natalie sat down again with Rob. They tabled the wedding plans and talked about Natalie’s Monday business meetings in Manhattan, about their parents—Natalie’s mother and stepfather in New Zealand—Rob’s mother in a nearby nursing home, with advancing Alzheimer’s.

“We’re looking at an entirely different family of drugs,” Natalie was saying as the phone rang—the landline, unusual since both depended almost exclusively on their mobiles.

A worried look passed between them. Who’d be calling on a Sunday night? Natalie jumped up, grabbed the kitchen phone, pressed the speaker button.

“Hello?”

“Thank God you’re there.” Her twin sister. Nicole’s voice distressed. Urgent. Something must be really wrong. Natalie’s first thought was Alex. Nicole, so cool, so tough, but so obsessively dedicated to her son.

“What’s wrong, Nicole?” Natalie turned, flashing Rob a look of concern.

“I can’t go into it now,” her sister said, “but could we grab lunch? Tomorrow. The William Penn. I have a surgical case in the morning. I can get there by noon. If I run late, I’ll have my office call you. Is that okay?”

She’d have to rearrange her meeting schedule for tomorrow afternoon, but for Nicole—of course.

“What’s wrong, Nicole. Is Alex all right?”

“He’s okay,” Nicole said in a near whisper, “for now.”

What did that mean? “I’ll be there. But are you okay? Do you want me and Rob to come over? Now? You sound very . . . well, not too good.”

“No, no, thanks. Really. I’m fine, Natalie,” Nicole said. “I have to go. See you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THREE

AS AHMED DROVE to the hospital, he thought about last night. How the argument had started about Alex's school—whether their son should switch to the mosque school. He'd made a mistake by letting Nicole treat the boy as if he had no Islamic heritage. His parents had worried about that from the day Alex—Wati—was born. And his son was not as tough as his brothers' and sister's boys back home. Why had he let Nicole raise the kid as such a sissy?

Nicole babied their son, didn't encourage the rough and tumble roustabout with other kids. Not that Ahmed wanted his son getting into fights or making trouble, but why couldn't he be more like *he'd* been at that age, a boy-boy. When he was a kid, he and his brothers, Jafari, two years older, and Seth, five years younger, drove their mother crazy. His father had to beat them to keep them in line. Nicole would go crazy if he ever hit Alex. He never had . . .

But he *had* struck Nicole. Hadn't meant to; but he had to do something *to get her attention*. Until last night, he'd thought himself too Westernized to hit a woman. Back home, it would be no big deal. But here, with Nicole . . . Well, it was done. She'd expect him to apologize, and he probably would, but at least he'd left early

enough to avoid any morning-after confrontation. Ahmed wondered whether she'd obey his instructions and sign up Alex at the Islamic Foundation. He supposed she'd be too busy with her cases.

Would he acquiesce to his family's demands, leave the United States, take his son—that question wouldn't stop screaming in the back of his mind. He ignored it. *For now.*

Ahmed pulled his black Mercedes sedan into the doctors' parking lot and headed toward the cafeteria situated off the lobby. He'd been so engrossed in his family issues that he'd shoved aside the phone call he'd taken at dinner last night—about a cranky sixty-seven-year-old obese female, wanting the perfect face. Now she had pneumonia. Well, she could wait another forty-five minutes while he enjoyed his breakfast.

The doctors' section had waitress service, and Ahmed ordered his usual yogurt and muesli with fresh fruit and raisin toast. One bite of toast, and his pager went off.

"Dr. Masud," he said through a mouthful.

"Doctor, your patient in Room 515 is coding. There's a team in there—"

"On my way," he said shoving his pager into his pocket.

Ahmed took the elevator to the fifth floor and entered a private room full of hospital personnel. As a plastic surgeon, he had no idea how to manage a code, but he made his presence known. Last time a patient had gone bad, he hadn't bothered to join the resuscitation team, and he got nailed by the plaintiff's attorneys in a court decision that had gone against him and the hospital.

None of the three nurses and two doctors paused to acknowledge him as they frantically worked to resuscitate his patient—pounded on the lady's ample chest, hooked her up to the defibrillator, and zapped her three times, stuck epinephrine directly in her heart with

a big needle . But after a forty-five minute eternity, the cardiologist running the code declared her. Cause of death: cardiac arrest.

He heard the question, “Dr. Masud, were there contributory causes?”

“Post-op pneumonia,” he said. So what. Lots of people, particularly obese ones, end up with pneumonia after surgery. No one could pin this one on him. One more lawsuit and his insurance planned to drop him. Beyond humiliating. His colleagues would shun him. Would Nicole stand by him? A plastic surgeon without insurance in America is professionally dead. His wife and business partner—the beautiful *and* lily white Nicole, blond hair, aquamarine eyes, 110 pounds slim—was collecting accolades and honors, while he . . .

Yesterday’s phone call, his father’s demands displaced all thoughts of the recently dead patient. *Leave your wife—or bring her. If you can keep her under control—*

“Dr. Masud, we’ll need to document—”

“Excuse me,” Ahmed offered, as he turned and left the patient’s room, his mind blazing with his decision.

I will return to Egypt. With or without Nicole. But definitely with my son.