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Eye on the Prize

LIBERTY
Publishing
www.libertybooks.com

Published by Liberty Publishing
C-16, Sector 31-A Mehran Town Extension,
Korangi Industrial Area, Karachi - Pakistan
www.libertybooks.com



This edition first being published in Pakistan

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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ISBN 978-969-8729-370

Printed and bound in Pakistan

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*To my Ammi, Sabiha
And Abu, Abdul Rauf For everything*

January 8, 2019

I want to become a writer and tell riveting stories like JK Rowling does. I want to see my name in print, win an award for my writing and make Mummy proud. I can see my mother accompanying me on stage when I receive the prize, a broad smile flooding her face as the audience gives me a standing ovation. Without her, this dream would be meaningless.

But Mummy doesn't have time for me.

I've been waiting for her to walk into my room and ask how I did on my school essay. It's been over three hours and she hasn't turned up yet. She must be busy at the office. The other day I wanted her to read to me. It's not because I can't read myself – after all, I'm going to be eleven in a month. I just like the sound of her deep voice. But Mummy didn't have time to do that.

I know Mummy loves me, but I doubt we have anything in common.

When I look at a photograph of her in which she's standing at the edge of a lake in Italy (or was it France?) in a pretty floral dress, I see no resemblance between us. I have her long, lean fingers, but even this fact isn't enough to put my doubts to rest. Sometimes I feel like an outsider in my own room. In these difficult moments, I look out the window in the hope that the stars will offer consolation for my pain. Don't get me wrong. I have many friends – Misha, Aleha, Mikael and Soha. But my best friends will always be my books. No one truly understands or even knows me. I feel lonely, like a plucked flower or a fish left on the shore.

Amarah-Noor

ONE

Shezray's heels clicked against the wooden tiles as she raced down the staircase. She winced at the thought of the permanent marks she was leaving on the floor with every step she took. The teak flooring had seemed like a good idea when they had built the house, but its maintenance had been gruelling. The abused teak gave way to sprawling limestone as she stepped into her living room, stopping momentarily at a console crammed with framed photographs. Shezray glanced at a picture taken at her graduation that usually made her smile. Today, it had the opposite effect.

The photograph reminded Shezray of the person she used to be. As a young girl, she was the perfect combination of intelligence and beauty. When Shezray was in her final year of A Levels, one of her classmates told her she was the most attractive girl he knew. She shuddered to think if he'd feel the same way had he come across her now.

Why wouldn't he? Shezray thought. She seemed enviably in control of her life as the owner of one of the largest business corporations in the country. Shez Textiles not only ran lucrative operations across Pakistan, but also exported to international brands such as H&M and Gap. But these achievements couldn't help Shezray weather the storms of her married life. Omer, her once-doting husband, seemed distracted. Shezray felt that he always seemed to be in a hurry to go somewhere – anywhere that was far away from her.

Omer was the operations head at her company and relied on her professional input.

‘Do you think the marriage will last?’ one of her pesky aunts had told her mother. ‘I hope you realise that your daughter is marrying a man who doesn’t measure up to her social standing. After all, he works for her.’

Her aunt’s words still stung, reminding her of all the doubts and insecurities people harboured about their marriage. Shezray was adamant to prove to her nosy relatives and friends that she could be happily married to a man who worked for her. At different stages of her life, Shezray had been condemned by well-meaning family members for being too fierce, outspoken and headstrong. While she didn’t need their approval, Shezray never ceased an opportunity to challenge them.

Shezray sighed unconsciously as she remembered how meeting Omer had made the possibility of marriage seem less daunting. *What a good-looking man he was*, she thought. Tall, brown-eyed and a natural brunette, Omer looked like he had stepped straight out of a fashion magazine. She had once proposed to make him her company’s cover model, but Omer had vehemently refused her offer. Apart from Omer’s striking good looks, Shezray was taken by how caring her husband was – or used to be.

Suddenly self-conscious, she flipped her phone to self-camera mode and gazed at her reflection. Unimpressed by the thick brows, creases around her lips and heavy bags

under her eyes, she twisted away from the mirror and hurriedly checked her phone.

She had gained weight after her younger daughter was born and was initially too lazy to put herself through an exercise regime to shake it off. In what could only be described as a weight-loss epiphany, she'd hired a personal trainer and dietitian a few months ago and painfully shed the ten kilos that were making her feel like a whale. Once she lost the extra weight, Shezray had planned to glide into parties in cocktail dresses and cropped tops. She looked a decade younger than her thirty-eight years, but she was no fool. Though she looked stunning in her filtered Instagram pictures, years of abusing her body with alcohol, cigarettes and party drugs couldn't be reversed so easily.

Her long, luscious tresses, which fell down to her waist, were her distinguishing feature. Omer often told Shezray that the first thing he noticed about her was her hair. It may have thinned considerably after she became a mother, but it still looked fantastic.

Shezray looked around the sun-kissed room and her eyes fell on the exorbitant painting hung over the sofa she had recently bought for her lounge. She and Omer had bought the painting in Barcelona from a quaint shop on La Rambla. *What a trip it had been!* Shezray could still recall the clothes she was wearing when she'd bought the painting – a floral midi dress that showed off her sleek ankles.

She scoffed ruefully. *Life was so simple back then.* They had spent days roaming the streets of Barcelona, soaking in its golden architecture. Forgetting her troubles, Shezray had glowed under the attention Omer gave her during the trip. Now, all this seemed like a distant memory.

Her eyes fell on a framed photograph of her two girls. Shezray's daughters didn't look like sisters. She traced her fingers along the wooden frame and observed a crack. *The frame must have fallen when I slammed the door yesterday,* she thought.

In the photograph, Amarah-Noor was tall and grey-eyed, with a noticeably long neck and sharp cheekbones. She looked catalogue-ready. All of Shezray's friends claimed she had taken after Omer. Natalia-Sophia, her younger daughter, stood next to Amarah-Noor in a ballerina tutu. Considerably darker and skinnier than her sister, she had an intense look that made her appear precocious. The sisters looked content in the photograph. But the picture was taken over a year ago and circumstances had changed since then. Now, Shezray's daughters had busied themselves with extracurricular activities and, for reasons unknown to her, seemed unhappy.

Though Shezray hadn't tried to understand what was troubling her children, she suspected that her constant agitation was weighing heavy on the girls. *How can you be so negligent and ungrateful?* She chided herself. Shezray had become a mother after years of being childless and

always felt that she needed to pay more attention to her children. Lately, she was so overwhelmed all the venom that malicious gossipmongers spewed about her marriage that she didn't have time for her own children. Whenever she went out in public, Shezray feared that everyone judged her relationship with Omer and felt that they were unsuited to each other. The class difference between them and the fact that she had managed to rope a specimen fit for the ramp were only part of the problem. Omer and Shezray were considered incompatible because their temperaments clashed more often than they should have.

The gentle ping of her phone pulled Shezray out of her reverie. She checked her watch and realised she was running late for work. With a sigh, she hurriedly slung her bag over her shoulder and ran out the door.

Minahil saw a pool of blood. The windows rattled against the sound of thunder. Just then, she heard a loud, inhuman howl and woke up shivering. Minahil was having another episodic collapse. She had them less frequently now. Most of her nightmares were fed by past traumas. But the shadow of the past had subsided and she was now in control. Wasn't she? *Who are you kidding?*

Wiping beads of sweat from her forehead and her upper lip, Minahil decided against falling asleep. If sleep was hell-bent on being her enemy, what could she do? She recalled the technique that her cognitive behavioural coach had taught her, hoping that it would comfort her.

‘Practice calm, conscious breathing,’ he’d said in a low voice. ‘Relax your muscles one at a time. Breathe in and out, in and out.’

Awake, she could regulate her thoughts better – eliminate, erase and compartmentalise. Yesterday had been a tough day. By nightfall, the culprit was, as always, her own chronic overthinking.

The weather had become dry of late and her throat was parched. Minahil got out of bed and searched for a glass. She usually kept one on her bedside table, but couldn’t find it anywhere. She looked around the room at her oak four-poster bed, the headboard and a confusing mix of gothic and neo-colonial patterns. The diwan placed opposite the bed was sandwiched between tall floor lamps, with shades so dark that they didn’t do much to light up the room. Minahil, who preferred open spaces, felt claustrophobic in her room.

Moving slowly in the dark, she almost tripped over a stack of books on the floor. Amaan hadn’t put them back on the shelf after reading in Minahil’s room before his bedtime. Though it was a week night, he’d wanted to get some extra reading done for his school Bookathon. Amaan loved to read – a habit that his father found objectionable because he feared it would make him too sensitive and unmanly. As she assembled the books in a neat pile, Minahil clicked her tongue, still perturbed by Bilal’s reluctance to accept that Amaan wasn’t interested in athletics.

‘When will he learn that his son isn’t interested in sport?’
Minahil murmured.

Though Bilal sincerely believed that his son needed a push in the right direction, he was motivated by factors that had little to do with his son. Minahil knew that Bilal was more concerned about his own reputation. He was, after all, a house captain at the very school Amaan now attended and it was inexcusable that his son lacked the drive to win any medals for sports. Bilal’s incessant need to mould his son into the athlete that he would never become was making Amaan insecure. If anything, it was their daughter Anya who overshadowed her slightly overweight older brother in sports. In the same way, Minahil found herself dwarfed in Bilal’s presence. Her husband had studied at some of the most prestigious institutions in the world and schmoozed with the right social circles. He did what many rich kids in Karachi were raised to do: take care of his family business. Minahil had sacrificed her career for Bilal and his dreaded family business. And yet, her husband and in-laws persistently made her feel like she was inferior to them.

‘Amaan is confident, intelligent and perceptive,’ Minahil said with a sigh. ‘When will Bilal realise this?’

Driven by the need to distract herself, Minahil considered playing a more proactive role in the children’s upcoming Track Day. *I’m not looking forward to it*, she grumbled. Parents of habitual winners, like Amaan’s class

fellow's mum Shezray, probably waited eagerly for this annual occasion. What did they know about mothers like her, who had to be careful not to put too much pressure on an already anxious child?

Bilal Jillani clicked his tongue when he noticed how slowly Amaan was walking towards the school building.

'Come on buddy!' Bilal exclaimed. 'Faster! Didn't you hear the school bell? Why is it taking you so long?'

'Race you to the foyer, Amaan!' Anya said excitedly as she ran past her older brother. Bilal beamed at the sight of his daughter gliding past a crowd of children. He turned back and noticed that his son was constantly adjusting the straps of his school bag against his shoulders as he attempted to brisk walk.

'Amaan, come on man,' Bilal said, struggling to conceal the disappointment in his tone.

Bilal found it difficult to understand how his son could be so infuriatingly mild-mannered and coy. Amaan was nothing like the other men in his family. Bilal had been raised to believe that boys needed to be chiseled into manhood through tough love and aggression. Old Man Jillani, his father, had always been stern with him. Old Man Jillani had moulded him into the strong man that Bilal knew he was. Amaan desperately needed a similar influence in his life.

'Coming Baba,' Amaan said, gasping for breath as he rubbed a line of perspiration from his forehead.

Bilal shook his head, astonished by his son's clumsy ways. When he was Amaan's age, he could have run a marathon without breaking a sweat. At the tender age of twelve, Bilal had been appointed to work as his father's part-time assistant after school. Old Man Jillani was a building contractor who demanded punctuality, precision and perfection. Still young, Bilal had to find a way to measure up to his father's expectations. Bilal didn't want him to think he was incompetent and obediently performed all tasks. His sole ambition was to prove that he was capable of carrying out challenging responsibilities without fail. Now, as Bilal looked back at those seemingly difficult years, he realised that all that hard work hadn't gone to waste. The years of hostility he'd suffered at the hands of his father had done him good.

That's it, Bilal thought. I just have to start being tougher on Amaan. His delicate ways just wouldn't do.

'Run,' Bilal shouted at his son. 'Don't you realise that you'll be the last person entering the class.'

Stunned by his father's tone, Amaan scampered into the school building. With a frustrated sigh, Bilal walked towards the school's gate, knowing well that he had done the right thing by being stern with Amaan.

Hina tied her shoulder-length hair in a loose bun and laid her yoga mat next to her bedroom window. She stared glassily at the windowsill and caught sight of a cobweb