

Life After
Ali

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By

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*For my love & husband Zaheer
My children Rizwan & Zara
I wouldn't have been a writer without you*

PROLOGUE

Moonlight streamed through the bedroom window, the cold light illuminating a man hunched over on a chaise longue. The woman across from him slept peacefully on her side of the bed, unaware that her husband was fighting with dark thoughts.

Ali had woken up panicky and sweating profusely from a dream where he was being crushed beneath a heavy weight. Try as he might, he couldn't pull himself free. He couldn't see what was pinning him down so brutally, even though he strained and pushed at it.

The same dream for weeks now. It couldn't be a coincidence. His brain tried to rubbish his fears, but panic gripped his heart in a cold vice.

He clenched his jaw, stopping the tears from flowing, afraid of waking up his wife. Having to answer her worried questions about why he was awake and shaking at this time of night, when everything was still, even the leaves on the trees. He didn't know how to explain the terror pumping through his veins, or the certainty that his time was almost up.

If the dreams were a sign, then Ali needed to prepare, to make sure his family would be taken care of. And he

needed to right an injustice that he had selfishly committed years ago.

He hoped Tasneem would forgive him when she found out that he had known everything.

CHAPTER ONE



'Bismillah ir rahman nir raheem'

Tasneem Zain had heard the words recited thousands of times throughout her life. Today, they brought tears to her eyes. Eyes that were already gritty and swollen with grief. The words claiming the mercy of Allah signalled the start of funeral prayers. It was the spiritual end to a human life, and marked her officially as a widow.

It was a phase in her life she'd never thought about or expected to come so soon. That she'd only be in her forties when her spouse died, instead of her seventies or even eighties, when death was expected and even welcomed...

Death was a strange thing, Tasneem thought as she sat in the women's section of the mosque. Sometimes, it came when you least expected it. With no warning signs. One day the person to whom you'd pledged your life was gone forever. Only their possessions remained as a reminder that they had been real.

Ali's death had brought an element of unpredictability to her once stable and secure life. Her world had changed overnight. She felt like a ship tossing about in stormy waters without any land in sight. She, like other Muslims, knew that the departed had left for a better place. But that was a faith-based view. Emotionally, the loved ones the dead had left behind had to adjust to the loss of a whole human being.

Tasneem was no stranger to death. She had lost both her parents to illnesses a few years ago. But Ali's death felt different. Like half of a shared life had disappeared into a black hole, leaving the other half floundering. She couldn't recognise herself anymore. And she couldn't pinpoint when her identity had merged with that of her marriage and husband. She hadn't even noticed herself blending in.

Low voices intruded on her thoughts as the familiar hum of Arabic words swirled around her. She was anchored in the moment, the fibres of the carpet soft and cool beneath her legs, and yet she was floating dreamily above everyone else. Heads covered in multicoloured *burqas* bent over copies of the Quran as the women's lips moved quietly.

The *imam* ended his recitation. The men stood up and formed a line. The women did the same in their section. Legs weak and unsteady, Tasneem stood up too, her eyes focused on the wall behind the women.

'*Sabar kar*, Tasneem. I pray that Allah gives you strength to face your loss,' the women murmured as they hugged her twice, first on her right side and then her left. She accepted their repeated phrases silently. Even though she had full permission to let go, to sob and cry hysterically, she didn't want to. Tasneem was afraid she wouldn't be able to stop once she started.

And despite the sadness of the occasion, there was something undignified about becoming hysterical in a public space. Her mum had always taught her to maintain appearances. No matter if you were barely holding it together on the inside, everything must appear perfect to others.

Tasneem didn't want to become the object of gossip. She didn't want to give them something to talk about at their next social do, where they'd cluck their tongues, shake their heads and lament the injustice of losing a husband at such a young age, in a foreign country, far away from the protection and support provided by an extended family.

As she accepted the women's condolences and reluctantly met their eyes, she saw pity and something like relief. That it wasn't them who had lost a partner. As a widow, Tasneem had joined a group of third-class citizens that everyone pitied and no one wanted to be. Widows were placed at the bottom of the social pecking order in their small community, while newlywed brides sat right at the top, loved and adored for their bright, shiny new beginnings. Widows had no right to voice wishes and desires. The part of Tasneem that was once vibrant had to disappear. She was forbidden from wearing bright colours or jewellery or makeup. Her laughter wouldn't reach its usual pitch and she wouldn't be able to fully express her joy at even the smallest things. Everything in her life had to be subdued. Like a TV turned down to its lowest sound and colour setting.

She'd seen her aunts go through it. Once-vibrant women who had laughed loudly and lived full and happy lives had become pale shadows under the weight of expectations and obligations, and sometimes

mistreatment at being financially dependent on relatives. One newly widowed aunt had refused to attend Tasneem's wedding, not wanting to be condemned publicly if something bad happened to the bride. She remembered her mum's relief at not having to tell the woman that she wasn't invited to the wedding anyway.

In Sydney, Tasneem could live a fairly normal life, though extreme modesty was still expected. Back home in India, being a widow meant a death sentence, a life of loneliness and prejudice. People treated you differently, like your life and wishes didn't matter anymore. A whole human life was reduced to practically nothing, because a husband had died.

She watched her daughter, Zara, being hugged and whispered to in a similar manner. Zara appeared to be going through the motions, standing quietly, nodding every now and then as someone spoke to her. Finally, the line dwindled and the room emptied out.

Tasneem let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Mercifully, the women left quickly. Death rites at the mosque were not a time to chit-chat with each other or to laugh loudly and gossip. The women talked in hushed undertones as they hurried out the doors, eager to go home to their husbands, who were alive and waiting impatiently.

Fatima, Tasneem's best friend, brought out a glass of water, sprinkled it around where they were standing, and handed them each a packet of sweets and nuts. Public mourning ended with this rite. Tasneem and Zara embraced Fatima and accepted the packets with whispered thanks. The final rite completed, mother and daughter stared at each other uncertainly.

‘Shall I come home with you?’ offered Fatima, sliding an arm around Tasneem, whose shoulders drooped with misery.

Tasneem shook her head. ‘The kids and I need to be with each other as we process Ali’s...’ She stopped and bit her lip, wincing at the polite, unspoken word – ‘passing’, which held a world of grief in its letters. Now that she was alone with her friend, the tears threatened to burst from behind her eyes. *Passing, deceased, departed...* Tasneem had heard all the formal words people had used since Ali had died. Meaningless labels to try to dress up her grief into something more presentable. As though giving it a label and placing it in a neat box would make it easier.

‘Take all the time you need,’ said Fatima, squeezing Tasneem’s hand gently. ‘Call me if you need me, day or night. Promise?’

‘I promise,’ said Tasneem, her voice cracking slightly. Her friend’s sympathetic tone almost undid her. They stood there for some moments, surrounded by the serenity often found in places of worship, created by an invisible, intricate network of the worshippers’ hopes, prayers and deepest desires. Tasneem didn’t want to leave and go back to reality. She felt cocooned and comforted by the peace and stillness of the mosque. She was afraid of stepping out into the real world that lay outside its doors.

Zara’s warm hand slipped into hers. Tasneem’s son, Husein, entered the women’s section, haggard but stoic under the immense sorrow of losing his father, at the tender age of eighteen.

‘Ready to go, Mum?’ In his white *kurta* and trousers, he resembled Ali in his youth. Tasneem teetered

dangerously close to tears again as a picture of Ali flashed through her mind.

‘Yes, we are,’ Zara answered instead, and tugged at Tasneem’s hand gently.

‘Take care, all of you,’ said Fatima. She paused. ‘When will you start your *iddah*?’

Tasneem rubbed her forehead. The *iddah* period suddenly loomed large in her mind. A compulsory mourning period for all Muslim widows, it meant spending the next four months and ten days behind closed doors. Her heart started beating faster. How would she cope with the isolation and the constant reminder of Ali’s absence, alone in a room?

She pushed the scary thoughts firmly away. She wouldn’t dwell on it until she absolutely had to.

‘After my sister Insia arrives from San Francisco in a few days.’ Tasneem leant against Zara, legs starting to tremble from fatigue. She felt drained. Like a wet towel that had had every last drop wrung from it. She didn’t think her legs would hold up for much longer.

They walked out of the mosque and into a quiet residential street in silence. The bright sunlight pricked Tasneem’s swollen eyes like a thousand needles all at once. She squinted through the pain as she and the children trudged towards the car. Fatima embraced her silently, seeming unwilling to let go. Tasneem gave her a watery smile and nodded to show she’d be okay.

She took a deep breath and, with a strength she hadn’t known she had, started the car to drive home.