

# FALSE IDOLS

SEASON 01

EPISODE 01

## OPERATION CAIRO

by LISA KLINK



ADAPTIVE



SERIAL  
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## False Idols

Layla el-Deeb left Egypt for good eleven years ago, after a childhood spent in Cairo's slums. Now she's a language expert for the FBI...and she's right back where she started, in Cairo, investigating a terrorist organization that's funding its activities through fraudulent art sales. But this isn't the Cairo she knew. She's landed right in the middle of the city's glittering elite, whose dealings in the art world may be the key to infiltrating the terrorist network. Undercover in the place she was born, trying to fit in with the city's high rollers, Layla is a stranger in every way—even to herself.

## Who's Who

**Layla el-Deeb (aka Layla Nawar):** A young, ambitious FBI agent undercover in Cairo, the place she thought she'd left behind for good.

**Ellen Pierce:** An intense FBI agent in charge of the national Art Crime Squad.

**James Rothkopf:** The cute son of Bennett Rothkopf; works in restoring artifacts that come through the Rothkopf Gallery.

**Bennett Rothkopf:** The charming owner of the Rothkopf Gallery and father of James Rothkopf.

**Gamal Ghaffar:** A career Egyptian intelligence officer in the General Intelligence Directorate; father of Layla's friend Jehan.

**Jehan Ghaffar:** A young socialite who brings Layla into her circle; Gamal Ghaffar's daughter.

**Nesim Farwadi:** A mover and shaker in Cairo's art scene who is posing as Layla's cousin to protect himself from the FBI's investigation.

# **False Idols**

## **Season 1, Episode 1**

### **Operation Cairo**

#### **Lisa Klink**

Layla faced the mirror and took a deep breath. When she went out there, she had to be effortlessly confident. She certainly looked the part, in a rose-colored Givenchy dress that complemented her olive skin and tasteful diamond earrings. She'd swept her dark hair off her neck into a smooth chignon and her makeup was perfect. She'd been prepping for this night for weeks. *I can do this.*

She stepped out onto the wide marble stairs leading down to the patio. At least fifty guests had gathered for the soiree, standing in groups around the pool or sitting in the gazebo, gazing out at the Cairo skyline under a nearly full moon, as waiters circulated with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. The guests were an eclectic, international group, ranging from a seventy-eight-year-old Belgian duchess to a twenty-something Japanese deejay, with one important thing in common. They were all extremely rich.

Farwadi joined her on the steps. He was a dapper little man in his mid-forties, wearing a tailored, pale gray suit, with a thick mustache and dark, wavy hair shellacked into place. "Are you ready?" he asked her nervously.

She nodded. "Are you?"

He looked out at his guests and tapped a small fork against the side of his champagne flute. The buzz of conversation quieted down and the guests turned their attention to Farwadi. He raised his glass. "Thank you all for being here tonight. I have someone very special I'd like you to meet. My cousin Layla." He tipped his glass in her direction and she smiled in return. "Layla is the youngest daughter of my beloved Aunt Fatma. I know that most of you have heard me tell stories about Aunt Fatma and her wild hat collection." A chuckle from the crowd confirmed this. "She was the only person I loved as much as my own parents. When she married and moved to San Francisco I know it broke my mother's heart. But she had a good life. Six years ago, we lost this wonderful woman to cancer."

Layla thought that Farwadi was laying on the sentiment a little thick, but his guests seemed to be eating it up. He went on, "My uncle has since passed away, and my cousins have scattered around the world. But Layla has always made the effort to stay connected to her mother's side of the family. And now she has moved to Cairo to pursue her interest in Egypt's rich cultural history. I hope I can count on those of you with expertise in that area"—Farwadi looked pointedly at a few of his guests—"to guide her as she builds her personal collection." He turned to her and raised his glass again. "Welcome, Layla!"

"Thank you, Nesim," said Layla. Now several of Farwadi's friends approached her, inspired by his heartfelt speech, eager to connect with his favorite cousin.

"I met Nesim fifteen years ago at an auction in Bruges ..."

"I met him in Tokyo ..."

"... in Moscow ..."

"... at my own gallery in Florence. I have some pieces there you might like."

Her cousin had quickly left Layla's side, she realized with some worry and annoyance. As she scanned the party, she spotted Miriam Goldman, a world-renowned collector of

ancient Sumerian artifacts. Goldman was a widow in her late forties, with glossy, dark brown hair cut in a short, no-nonsense bob. Layla had seen her home featured in a design magazine.

Layla introduced herself, and congratulated Goldman on her latest acquisition. “I hear that you beat out twelve different bidders for the cylinder seal of Ashur.” By all accounts, the woman was a fierce negotiator who never backed down from a fight.

“Fourteen, actually. It’s a remarkable piece.”

Layla leaned in, lowering her voice to a confidential hush. “Wasn’t there some debate about its authenticity?”

The woman scoffed. “Rumors spread by my competitors to drive down the price. The seal has been authenticated by three different experts, and I’ve personally met the archaeologist who excavated the site.”

“I don’t blame you for being careful,” said Layla. “There’s a lot of fraud in the antiquities market.”

“Yes. There is,” she said. Then she smiled and took the younger woman’s hands in her own. “I would love to introduce you to my boys.”

Goldman led her over to a pair of young men standing by the gazebo. “Marcus, Adrian, this is Layla.” When they turned toward her, she saw that they were twins. They were in their mid-twenties and identically handsome, although Marcus had dark hair and Adrian had bleached his a startling platinum blond.

Marcus nodded to her. “Hey.”

She returned the nod.

“Would you like a drink?” asked Adrian as Layla watched Miriam Goldman disappear into the crowd of guests. She had obviously hit a nerve with her comment about fraud.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” she told them. The twins seemed friendly enough, but she didn’t want to get stuck chitchatting with them. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to use the powder room.” *That’s what rich people call the bathroom, right?*

Layla slipped away and went into the house. It was a unique structure, to say the least, combining stone from ancient ruins with contemporary stucco and tile. Farwadi liked to tell people that the design reflected his modern sensibilities, as well as the history of the Egyptian people, which would always be part of him. She thought this sounded a bit pretentious, but his friends and associates seemed to be charmed.

She found Farwadi hiding out from his own party on a small porch off the kitchen, holding a half-empty glass of what looked like Scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “I quit these years ago,” he said miserably, taking a long drag. “Now I’ve started again.”

“Everything’s going well,” she assured him. “Your speech was lovely.”

“I hate this. I hate lying to everyone.”

“I know.” She felt a twinge of sympathy for the man, even though he had no one but himself to blame for his current dilemma. “But this is what you agreed to.”

“I’m well aware of that,” he said in a clipped tone.

As Farwadi started to take a drink of Scotch, she snatched the glass from his hand and dumped the contents over the side of the porch. “I need you sober. We still have work to do. I want you to introduce me to the Ghaffars.”

He looked surprised. “You don’t believe that they’re involved in this nasty business? Noor is on the board of ECHO,” he said, referring to the Egyptian Cultural Heritage Organization, a group dedicated to protecting archaeological sites from looting and vandalism.

“Yes, and that gives her access to the most well-protected sites,” Layla told him. “Where ancient relics have a funny habit of disappearing, then showing up on the black market and selling for millions.”

Farwadi stubbed out his cigarette. He grudgingly led her back to his guests.

• • •

#### FOUR WEEKS AGO

Layla didn’t know what kind of situation she was walking into as she descended to the lower decks of the cargo ship. She made her way into the hot, cramped galley to find three men with guns, shouting at one another in different languages. Agents Holt and Santos were yelling at the young man in the cook’s uniform—a kid, really, no more than eighteen or nineteen—to put down his gun. The kid was clearly terrified. Layla couldn’t blame him. Five minutes ago, he would have been going about his business, securing the galley as the MSC *Zephyr* docked in New York Harbor, when suddenly two armed men had stormed in and started yelling in some incomprehensible tongue. For all he knew, the Joint Terrorism Task Force agents commandeering his ship were pirates. So he’d grabbed a handgun to defend himself, resulting in the standoff.

When it became clear that they weren’t communicating, Agent Holt had picked up his radio and called in Agent Layla el-Deeb, a language specialist with the Intelligence Division. Rumor had it that she spoke twenty different languages. This was an exaggeration, which Layla herself made no effort to correct.

She approached the two male agents, who towered over her. Layla was five feet four and looked even younger than her twenty-nine years. Her less-than-intimidating appearance sometimes made it hard to be taken seriously as an agent, but now she hoped it might reassure the frightened cook.

“Has he said anything?” she asked Holt, keeping her voice low and calm.

He shook his head. “We tried English and Spanish. No response.”

Layla nodded. She knew the cargo ship had come to New York from Mozambique, where a local crew had probably been hired. The official language of Mozambique was ... she could remember this ... Portuguese. It was worth a try. She held the young man’s gaze as she showed him her empty hands. “*Não vamos machucá-lo,*” she told him. “*Largue a arma.*” *We won’t hurt you. Put down the gun.*

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. Shit. So much for Portuguese. What else did they speak in Mozambique? The kid’s high cheekbones and ebony skin hinted at East African heritage. There was a good chance he spoke Swahili. Her own Swahili, unfortunately, was limited to an online tutorial she’d taken several years ago. It hadn’t exactly covered situations like this. Agents Holt and Santos were watching her, waiting for her to say something. She began slowly, searching for the right words. “*Hatutaki ... kummeza.*”

The corner of his mouth twitched with involuntary amusement. She’d said something wrong. Didn’t *kummeza* mean ...? Then Layla had to smile, too. She had just informed the young man that they didn’t want to swallow him, rather than telling him that they didn’t want to hurt him. If she’d really been thinking, she would have made the mistake on purpose, because it made him relax his guard, just a bit. Sticking to Swahili, she asked his name. “*Jina?*”

“Juma,” he ventured.

“Layla,” she told him, indicating herself. Then she hesitated, unable to come up with the Swahili word for “gun.” So she mimed the action she wanted, kneeling and laying an imaginary weapon on the floor. “*Chini,*” she said, meaning “down.” She hoped. Juma



watched this, then looked back at Holt and Santos, who still had their semiautomatics trained on him.

“Lower your weapons,” Layla told them. “He’s not going to shoot. He’s just scared.” The men hesitated, exchanging a quick look over her head, debating whether to follow her orders. She switched to official FBI-ese. “We need to de-escalate the situation.”

Holt considered this, then slowly lowered his gun. Santos did the same. Layla looked back at Juma and nodded. Your turn. He studied the three of them, evaluating their intent, his dark brown eyes still wide with fear. She waited, resisting the urge to prompt him again, hoping that her colleagues wouldn’t lose patience and charge in. Finally, Juma knelt and placed his handgun on the floor.

“*Asante*,” she said. *Thank you*.

The agents quickly stepped forward. Layla picked up the gun while the men pulled Juma’s arms behind his back and zip-tied his hands together. She felt conflicted as they escorted him up to the main deck and off the ship. Being part of Operation Treasure Hunt, as the JTTF had dubbed it, was a welcome change from sitting at her desk all day, translating documents and voice recordings collected by other agents. She knew it was important work, but it wasn’t what she had joined the FBI to do. She wanted to be out in the field, digging up evidence and solving crimes.

“Nice work,” said Holt, as he and Santos led their prisoner away to join his twenty-two crewmates lined up on the concrete dock under the watchful eye of the Waterfront Commission police. Layla wouldn’t be part of the interrogation team. They had more highly trained agents, and more fluent Swahili speakers, for that. Agent el-Deeb was dismissed.

She stood in the cold rain for a moment, frustrated. Then she walked along the busy dock, curious to find out how Operation Treasure Hunt was unfolding. It was a massive operation, with agents from the ATF, Coast Guard, Customs, and the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor, all under the supervision of the FBI. The Joint Terrorism Task Force had cordoned off a section of the shipyard and commandeered a terminal building for the operation. Three enormous cranes were unloading forty-foot steel cargo containers from the MSC *Zephyr*, setting them down in the shipyard. Agents swarmed around each container with radiation detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs, searching for those that had been flagged by their agencies. The *Zephyr* carried more than twenty-eight hundred containers. This was going to take a while.

She noticed a crowd gathered around one of the open containers and went to see what they were looking at. Inside the steel box was a huge cache of guns and explosives. Tom Monaghan, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of Counterterrorism in the New York office, stood beside it triumphantly, along with three members of his elite strike team. All male, of course. Most of the high-profile squads in the Bureau still were. Monaghan grabbed a Kalashnikov rifle from the hoard and brandished it over his head, shouting, “Fuck the Muharib!”

A cheer went up from the onlookers, who came from different, often competing agencies, but were united in their hatred of the ultra-violent terrorist group known as the Muharib el-Salafi. The Muharib had bombed civilian sites in Egypt, Turkey, and, most recently, a Christmas mass in Sicily. Over the past few weeks, Layla had been translating messages from FBI informants in the Middle East, reporting alarming intel about the Muharib smuggling weapons to its agents in the United States in preparation for an attack. The arsenal in the shipping container seemed to confirm those reports.

Layla approached Monaghan, a brawny guy with blond hair and craggy features, which some women, she knew, found irresistible. He’d recently been promoted from Supervisory Special Agent to ASAC. He was management now and was supposed to coordinate

operations from his desk. But he couldn't stay away from the excitement of the field, and delegated all the boring paperwork to someone else. She wasn't even sure he had a desk. "Congratulations," she told him. "Quite a catch."

"It was a team effort." He gestured to the other members of the strike team, gracious in his moment of triumph. Then he remembered to include the woman standing in front of him. "You were a big help, too ..." She saw him struggling to remember her name.

"So the reports were true," she concluded grimly. "The Muharib really are planning something in the US. Where was the shipment headed?"

"The address on the manifest is a self-storage place in Pennsylvania. I'll have someone there in case anybody shows up to collect, but it's probably a dead end. This operation wasn't exactly covert." He looked around the dock, bustling with activity. "We have to assume the Muharib will find out we grabbed their toys. At least this shipment."

She hadn't considered this. "You think there are more coming in?"

"I'd bet on it. One thing about the Muharib—they always have a contingency plan. But don't worry. We'll get 'em." He gave her a condescending pat on the shoulder. She gritted her teeth and tried to smile.

An exuberant ATF agent came up to Monaghan and gave him a high five that would have knocked Layla flat. "Awesome work!" he exclaimed.

Layla rolled her eyes and moved off through the maze of steel containers, past several that were being opened and searched. She saw a tall, thin woman dragging a large wooden crate out of one of them, and recognized her as Ellen Pierce. Layla had been following her career ever since she joined the FBI. Pierce was one of the few women to rise through the ranks of the male-dominated Bureau. She'd done it by being even more fearless than the guys; leading midnight raids on meth labs and going undercover with a particularly vicious drug gang in New York. Two years ago, she'd become the first female director of the national Art Crime Squad. Sure, one could argue that stolen art wasn't exactly a high priority for the FBI, but it was impressive nonetheless.

"Give you a hand with that?" Layla asked, going around behind the crate and pushing as Pierce pulled.

"Thanks." They slid it out of the container and onto the dock. The older woman extended a hand. "Ellen Pierce, Art Crime."

"Layla el-Deeb. Intelligence." They shook hands.

"Nice to meet you." Pierce nodded to a box of tools on the ground near Layla's feet. "Hand me that crowbar?"

She did, and the senior agent got to work prying open the crate. They heard the slap of another high five as Monaghan took his victory lap, accepting congratulations from everyone involved in the raid. "It's great to meet you, too," said Layla. "But what's Art Crime doing on a JTTF op?"

"Hunting for treasure," said Pierce with a grimace as she prized the lid off the crate. She reached in and dug through the Styrofoam peanuts, then lifted out a fist-sized object wrapped in newspaper. "Terrorist groups like the Muharib sell stolen art and antiquities to raise money to buy all those weapons."

Monaghan heard this as he was passing and stopped to gloat a little more. "You mean, like the ones we just confiscated?"

Pierce ignored him, continuing her conversation with Layla as she unwrapped the layers of newspaper. "Collectors in the West pay top dollar for Egyptian relics. These were on their way to a ritzy gallery in Chelsea." She pulled away the last of the paper to reveal ... a cheap plaster bust of King Tut covered in gaudy gold and blue paint.

Layla's heart sank for her as Monaghan guffawed loudly. "Yeah, they'll get at least a buck and a half for that baby."

Pierce said nothing as she got a hammer and chisel from the toolbox. She set the bust of King Tut on top of another crate and delicately chipped at the plaster until it cracked. As she picked off the broken pieces, Layla saw what the coat of plaster had been hiding: a long-necked ceramic vase, glazed jade green with a gilded Eye of Horus on one side. "That's beautiful," she said.

"It's a ritual amphora, from around the fourteenth century BC. Probably used to hold scented oil." Pierce turned to Monaghan, holding up the amphora with great satisfaction. "This piece alone is worth at least ten thousand dollars. And there are maybe a dozen more like it in this crate."

"Wow," said Layla, all innocence. "That's a lot of Kalashnikovs."

She heard a barely suppressed snicker and turned to see that two other Counterterrorism agents were watching the exchange. Monaghan flushed, glared at all of them, then strode off. The women laughed. Layla examined the amphora more curiously. "So tell me about this gallery in Chelsea."

Pierce smiled. "I've been investigating the owner, Nesim Farwadi, for the past year and a half. I know he's been smuggling antiquities out of Egypt through his main gallery in Cairo, but I haven't been able to prove it until now. The Muharib thing is just speculation. I mean, terrorist groups like the Muharib do sell antiquities like this, but I can't prove that this particular gallery is connected to this particular group. I wanted to be in on this op because I knew that Farwadi had illegal goods in this shipment." She held up the little vase. "And I sure would love to hear what he has to say about them."

"If you really want to throw him off his game, you should confront him in the middle of his gallery. He won't know how to handle a powerful woman, especially in front of his own customers." Pierce gave her a curious look and she explained, "I grew up in Cairo. Dealing with men like that."

"You should come with me to question him."

"Right now?" Layla felt excitement pulse through her.

"Unless you need to get back to the office ..."

"No," she said quickly, desperate to avoid her desk. "I have some time."

• • •

As Farwadi and Layla went out to the patio, she took a moment to slip back into the persona of Layla Nawar, straightening her spine and tilting her chin ever so slightly to capture that self-entitled, rich-girl attitude.

Farwadi swept her through the party toward a couple who seemed to radiate importance. "Noor and Gamal Ghaffar," he said, "my darling cousin, Layla Nawar." Layla hoped the Ghaffars didn't pick up on the somewhat sarcastic exaggeration Nesim had placed on the word "darling." If he got any drunker he was going to become a liability.

Gamal Ghaffar was a tall, barrel-chested man with the dignified bearing of an ex-soldier. Layla was aware that he was a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate, a powerful, secretive organization whose critics often disappeared without a trace. His personal beliefs were notoriously conservative. Layla saw him eyeing her pink dress with clear disapproval. By Western standards, the dress was downright demure, with cap sleeves, a modest neck, and a full skirt that hit below the knee. But it flattered her curves in a way that Gamal apparently found inappropriate for a nice Muslim girl. Farwadi's family was Muslim, so he would naturally assume that Layla was as well. For a moment, she was

tempted to tell Gamal that she was actually Coptic Christian, just to see his reaction. He might find that even more horrifying than learning she was FBI.

But Layla was more interested in his wife, Noor. She was dressed in a traditional, loose-fitting abaya of richly embroidered, royal blue silk, with a matching hijab.

“Jehan! Come join us,” called Noor. A tall, willowy young woman broke off from the group she was talking to and came over to them. She was twenty-two or twenty-three at most, with high cheekbones and dark, somehow mournful eyes. She wore a long denim skirt and a high-necked, three-quarter-sleeve blouse in an eye-catching lemon yellow, along with a white hijab shot through with gold threads and a chunky gold necklace. Her skin was sufficiently covered to meet conservative standards, but the bright color and gold bling weren’t exactly modest.

Noor brushed an errant lock of hair off her face. “Layla, my daughter Jehan.”

They exchanged greetings. “Love your dress,” said the young woman. “Givenchy?”

“Yes.” She saw Gamal’s jaw tighten and wondered if Jehan was deliberately provoking her father with the compliment.

It wasn’t long before Noor excused herself and her husband to talk to another friend. *Another adult*, thought Layla. She realized that the Ghaffars were pawning her off on their kid, as Miriam Goldman had done with her two sons.

Jehan grabbed her hand. “Come on. Hang with us.”

Layla reluctantly let herself be led over to the fire pit, where the younger generation was gathered. The Goldman twins sat on one of the low teak benches by the fire. “There you are. We thought you got lost on your way to the ‘powder room,’” Adrian teased. She made a mental note to strike the term from her “rich-girl” vocabulary.

Jehan seemed to be the informal social director of the group. She guided Layla to a seat near a twenty-something Japanese guy with spiked hair and introduced him as Hiro. “You like house music? Rap?” he asked.

“Sure.” *Why not*, thought Layla, wondering if she’d be relegated to the kids’ table for the rest of the night.

“This is Chloe.” Jehan sat beside a pale woman with long, auburn hair and put an arm around her shoulders. “She’s been having guy trouble.”

“Because her boyfriend’s an asshole,” offered Hiro.

“He is not!” said Chloe, in a thick Australian accent.

Jehan joined the debate about Neal, the alleged asshole, while the Goldman twins held their own conversation in Swiss German. They were saying something about their house in Bern. Layla quietly eavesdropped as they relived the highlights of the wild party they had thrown while Mueti was away on a buying trip. She realized that these “kids” might not be a bad source of information after all.

“Sounds like fun,” said Layla, in German. “Call me next time she’s out of town.”

They looked at her, startled that she spoke the language. Marcus smiled and replied in English. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

The words caught Hiro’s attention. “Do what?”

“Invite Layla to our next party.”

“Definitely!” Jehan agreed, then put a hand on Layla’s arm, “But if he gives you something called a supernova, don’t drink it. Trust me.”

And just like that, she’d been accepted into the group. They continued talking about other parties, from a New Year’s Eve bash in Hong Kong to a surprise party in Mazatlán that everyone agreed had been a total disaster. Layla got the impression that these people spent their lives simply going from one party to the next. She wondered if any of them actually had a job but knew that Farwadi’s wealthy cousin wouldn’t ask.



The conversation turned to future parties, and who would be attending what. Layla was invited to join in all the fun. She doubted, however, that the FBI would approve the expense of a last-minute ticket to China or Brazil. “I’ll have to check with Nesim,” she said, deliberately vague. “I know he’s made a lot of plans.”

By midnight, the party was winding down. The older guests had gone home, and the younger crowd headed out to the clubs. “Come with us!” urged Jehan, but Layla begged off.

“I’m exhausted,” she explained. “But I’ll see you at the Arts Council fundraiser next week.” Jehan hugged Layla, then piled into a taxi with her friends.

Finally, the house was empty. Layla retrieved her oversized Chanel handbag from the closet, feeling exhilarated. For a rookie, she was pretty damn good at this. But she hadn’t been able to stop Farwadi from drinking. He staggered as he escorted her out to the street, where his driver was waiting to take her home. “Thank you,” she told him. “You did a great job tonight.”

“Are you happy now? Am I finished?” he demanded.

“No, but it was a good start.” When he didn’t respond, she prompted, “Understood?”

“Yes,” he snapped. He looked out at the Cairo skyline, shaking his head mournfully. “I’m glad Tahia and the children aren’t here.” He’d sent his wife and kids to visit her parents, so they wouldn’t have to participate in the undercover scheme. “All of this feels like a curse on my family.”

“What do you mean?”

Farwadi stared at her, as if surprised that she didn’t understand. “To lie about them like this. It feels like I’ve laid a curse on my own blood.”

Layla turned and slid into the backseat of the waiting Mercedes without another word to Farwadi. She felt an unexpected flare of anger at the man. He and his family, and everyone at the party, had been blessed with lives of privilege that she could hardly have imagined as a child. She may have grown up in Cairo just a stone’s throw from this mansion, but the world of the people she met tonight could not be further from the Cairo she knew, that her family knew. Farwadi had no idea what it was like to be part of a truly cursed family.

Layla had grown up in the Cairo slum of Manshiyat Naser, also known as Garbage City, home to a large number of Coptic Christians, including the el-Deebs. They were a widely despised minority in Cairo, and often the only work they could find was collecting the city’s trash, which they brought home and dumped in the streets for their families to scavenge through, looking for any discarded bits of metal or plastic they could sell to the recycling plant or, if they were lucky, scraps of still-edible food.

Layla’s father had been a proud man and had forbidden her and her two younger siblings from touching the piles of garbage, but sometimes they spotted something interesting and couldn’t resist digging it out. The pervasive stench lingered in their hair and clothes. When Layla arrived at school, she would see the disgust her teacher tried to hide if she got too close. And she heard the whispered taunts of her fellow students during class, “*zabbaleen*”—garbage person. But Layla still went to school, enduring their scorn, every day. Even then, she knew it was the only way she’d ever get out of Garbage City.

Now here she was, sitting in the back of a Mercedes, kicking off her Jimmy Choos. Her phone buzzed. As if he had felt her thinking of their childhood, a text from her brother Rami appeared.

*It’s a beautiful night here. Spring is in the air. What’s it like there?*

He was assuming she was in New York, of course. She couldn’t tell him she was really in Cairo, or he’d want to see her, which was out of the question during an undercover operation. So she opened the weather app on her phone and looked at the listing for New York. The city was under an onslaught of icy rain that would run through the night.

*Stormy here*, wrote Layla.

She waited for a few seconds but he didn't respond. That was the extent of their communication, really, a back-and-forth focused primarily on the weather. It had been that way since Layla left Cairo eleven years ago. Rami had been nine years old and obsessed with weather. She found it hard to imagine him now, as a young man in his second year of university. Tuition was free for Egyptian citizens, but textbooks and living expenses weren't, so Layla sent him money when she could. She didn't want him to be the poorest kid in class anymore, to be shackled to his childhood in Manshiyat Naser. She knew she was miles from the slums of Garbage City, but she imagined she could smell the relentless stench. Her mother and her sister Sanaa still lived there. She pressed her palm against the window, wondering what it might be like to see them, or Rami, again. Tears stung her eyes as she remembered Farwadi's words—"a curse on my family."

She leaned forward and told the driver, "I don't want to go home yet. Take me to el-Hegaz Street." It was the main drag of a trendy neighborhood, full of bars and restaurants that would be open late.

He nodded, and changed direction. But they'd only gone a few blocks when the car slowed to a stop. "What is it?" she asked.

"Police checkpoint."

Layla's heart automatically skipped a beat. "Did something happen?" Her mind jumped to the possibility of a terror attack.

"Not that I know of." He sounded more irritated than alarmed. "There were some student protests in support of Fareed Monsour last week and the government wants to make sure there aren't any more." She'd been reading about Monsour. He was the leader of the Open Society party, which pledged to expose human rights abuses by the current government and put an end to censorship. With parliamentary elections less than a year away, the party was rapidly gaining support.

They reached the checkpoint. She dug out her passport and gave it to the officer. She couldn't tell if his uniform was police or military. The difference between them seemed to be narrowing these days. No wonder Monsour's message was resonating. The driver handed over his passport as well. Layla resisted the urge to smile and make nice with the man who currently controlled her fate. Child of privilege Layla Nawar wouldn't bother. She put on a vaguely bored expression as the officer briefly examined both passports, then tossed them back to their owners and waved the car on.

Layla asked the driver to stop in front of a bar on El Hegaz Street. "I don't need you to wait for me. I'll get a taxi home."

"Are you sure? A woman alone at night ..."

She leaned forward and handed the man a substantial tip. "I'm sure."

The bar was packed with customers. Layla pushed her way through them to the ladies' room at the back and ducked into a stall. She opened her huge purse and pulled out a gray, long-sleeved cardigan, which she put on over her party dress. Then she took out a black hijab and put that on as well. Layla emerged and checked herself in the mirror. She was satisfied that anyone who might have seen her going into the club wouldn't recognize the same woman coming out. As an added precaution, she slipped out the back door. She followed the alley behind the building to the nearest street and hailed a cab. "Sixty-five el-Falaki, please."

It was past one a.m. when Layla let herself into the modest, two-bedroom apartment. The lights were on and Special Agent Ellen Pierce was still awake, waiting for her.

The apartment was, officially, an FBI safe house. Pierce was living there while using it as a makeshift field office for the undercover op. “The party went well,” Layla told her. “Farwadi did exactly what we needed him to do.”

Pierce smiled. “So who did you meet?”

Layla approached a large whiteboard hanging on the wall of the living room. It was covered with pictures of the collectors and dealers they were investigating, linked with different colors of thread, mapping out the complex web of personal and professional relationships between them. “I talked to Miriam Goldman briefly,” she said, using a dry-erase marker to put a check mark beside the woman’s picture. “And Noor Ghaffar. Also briefly.” Another check. She knew this didn’t sound very impressive, so she added, “I also connected with their children. Marcus and Adrian Goldman.” She wrote the names next to their mother’s picture. “Jehan Ghaffar. I’m invited to half a dozen house parties in the next month.” She’d wait to bring up the issue of airfare. “The best part is, the kids probably have no idea what their parents are hiding. They’ll hardly notice if I disappear in the middle of a party to go search the house.”

“Hell, they’ll probably show you where Mom hides all the good stuff if you ask.” Pierce grinned and surveyed the board again. She was whippet-thin and intense, with a kind of nervous energy radiating off her.

“You want a drink?” Pierce asked, tearing her gaze from the board.

“Sure.”

“I think I’ve got wine. Let’s see.” She padded to the kitchen, calling back to Layla, “How’s it feel?”

“How’s what feel?”

“Being undercover.”

Layla considered this. “It’s ... weird. And wild. Kinda surreal. It feels almost like make-believe, or playacting. I like it.”

Pierce returned and handed her a glass of red wine. She tapped her own glass against Layla’s. Layla gratefully sipped the wine. She’d been so immersed undercover that she had forgotten how anxious she felt. Anxiety had become part of her, along with the constant fear of being caught out. But the Layla reflected back at her in the glass looked confident.

She saw that Pierce was studying her, too. “Be careful, Layla.”

“I’m careful. I know the procedures.”

“I’m not talking about procedures. I’m talking about the slippery slope going undercover can put you on.”

“Burnout?”

“No, not burnout, exactly. It’s more like ... inside out.” Pierce took a long, thirsty pull on her glass and stepped away from the window. “You get so tuned into your cover, the ‘playacting,’ and the next thing you know you’re not playing anymore. You’re in it and it is you.”

“I don’t think that will happen here. I can hardly even identify with these people. They travel. They shop. They go to parties. Their lives are totally free and pointless.” Layla turned. Pierce was seated on the chair next to the evidence board, cradling her glass in her hands and looking at the floor between her feet.

“You think it’s different in any other situation? Narcotics? Racketeering? Organized crime? Agents walk in thinking they’re gonna be surrounded by bad guys. That they’ll always be able to tell the difference. But when you’re under you’re under. You start to realize you’re surrounded by *people*, flesh and blood. Things can get fuzzy. You can lose perspective.”

“Did that happen to you?”

Pierce leaned back and stared at the ceiling. She was so thin, all sharp angles and lines. “Maybe. I guess. Yeah. If losing perspective means losing everything. Sometimes you go hunting for something and you lose sight of what you’re really looking for.”

• • •

## FOUR WEEKS AGO

Layla sat in the passenger seat as Pierce inched the black Ford Taurus through the dense traffic of West 24<sup>th</sup> Street on their way from the raid at the harbor to Nesim Farwadi’s Manhattan gallery. “Do you get back to Cairo very often?” Pierce asked.

Layla forced a rueful smile. “Not as often as I’d like.” Translation: not once since she’d walked out of her family’s tiny apartment half a lifetime ago, vowing never to set foot in Cairo again.

But the older woman could see the struggle behind her facade. “I’ve spent a lot of time in Egypt,” she said. “Worked out of the American Embassy in Cairo for almost a year. I like it. But it couldn’t have been an easy place for a girl, especially a smart girl, to grow up.”

This understanding took Layla by surprise. She answered honestly. “No. It wasn’t. Most of the girls in my class dropped out before we graduated to get married.”

Pierce regarded her with increasing respect. “And you went off to college in the States. Let me guess ... Princeton? Harvard?”

“Georgetown.”

“Your family must be really proud,” said the senior agent.

Layla simply nodded. She didn’t want to get into the ugly truth about the endless screaming fights she’d had with her parents. Her father had considered school a waste of time for a girl and started pressuring her to drop out when she was fifteen. “Don’t be so selfish,” he told her at least once a week, as she returned from school. “You have a duty to your family.”

But Layla had dreamed of going to college. Preferably somewhere far away. She had worked on her applications in the school’s meager library and scraped together the money for postage. The day she’d received her acceptance letter from Georgetown, along with notification of her full scholarship in linguistics, had been the proudest of her life. It had also been the day she’d walked away from the only home she’d ever known, determined never to return.

Layla broke the silence by getting back to the matter at hand. “So how did Farwadi end up on your radar?”

“I was investigating some questionable acquisitions at the Met. He was never a suspect, but he knew the major players in the art world. All of the high-end dealers and collectors go to the same fundraisers and big gallery openings.” She waved a hand to indicate the trendy art galleries on both sides of the street. From the outside, they just looked like office buildings, with no hint of the pricey paintings and sculptures inside. At least, that’s what Layla assumed was in there. She’d never actually set foot in this part of Chelsea, much less gone inside the galleries. They’d probably charge her a fee just to breathe the rarified air.

Pierce honked at a Jaguar trying to cut in front of her. “You wouldn’t believe these people,” she went on. “Penthouses in Manhattan, villas in Florence, private jets ... It’s like one big, international country club, with the super-rich buying and selling million-dollar pieces over a round of golf, or sailboat regatta, or whatever.”

“Not really my scene,” said Layla. She was currently sharing a small apartment in Long Island City, an hour’s train ride from the FBI field office, with two annoying roommates.



And that was a step up from the rat hole she'd lived in when she first moved to New York six years ago.

Pierce went on, "The problem is that most of their business is perfectly legit, which makes it tough to spot the illegal sales. I need someone with inside knowledge, like Farwadi, to help me figure out how the underground antiquities market works and who's involved."

Layla nodded. "And now that you have some leverage ..."

"He'll be much more inclined to cooperate." Pierce pulled the car into a parking spot in front of the Farwadi Gallery and put an FBI placard on the dashboard to forestall getting towed. "Of course, if we threaten him with charges right away, he'll clam up and call his lawyer. We need to ease into it, make him think he can talk his way out of trouble."

"Outsmart the silly police."

"Exactly."

They left their FBI windbreakers in the car and went into the gallery. It was, Layla had to admit, impressive—an open, two-story space with white walls that curved seamlessly around the room, illuminated by an enormous, frosted glass globe that hung from the ceiling by a single chain. Half a dozen people were perusing the work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists, from bronze sculptures to brightly colored abstract paintings.

"This is all the legal merchandise," said Pierce as she peered at a distorted portrait in orange and magenta. "The illegal stuff changes hands in private."

They spotted Farwadi talking to an older Asian couple in front of a large desert landscape. He glanced over at the two women as they entered, in their off-the-rack clothes and utilitarian shoes, and swiftly dismissed them as unlikely customers. He continued his sales pitch as Pierce approached. "The desolate beauty of this landscape conveys both the grief and endurance of the people in the artist's homeland ..."

His pompous tone reminded Layla of a teacher she'd had in secondary school. When he paused to draw breath, Pierce asked, "Mr. Farwadi, can we speak with you?"

Without the slightest acknowledgement, he turned away from her, leading the older couple toward a painting of white birds in flight against a red sky. "This piece was featured in a show at the prestigious Rampa Gallery in Istanbul."

Layla saw the other woman's jaw tighten. Pierce pulled out her badge and showed it subtly. "FBI, Mr. Farwadi. We need to ask you some questions."

Layla saw a flash of panic cross Farwadi's face before it flushed a deep red. He nodded, struggling to maintain his composure. "Please join me in my office ..."

He started toward a door in the back, gesturing for them to follow. Pierce didn't budge. "That's all right. This shouldn't take too long," she told him, her voice echoing through the open space. Layla stifled a smile.

Farwadi straightened to his full height but still had to look up at the taller woman. "What can I do for you, Agent ...?"

She lowered her volume a notch. "Pierce," she told him, then nodded to Layla, in flanking position to his left. "This is Agent el-Deeb. We're investigating a shipment of art and antiques that arrived in New York Harbor this morning, on its way to your gallery."

Layla saw him tense up. He knew exactly what was in that shipment. She smiled sweetly and gave the man an out. "We think that someone at the port in Mozambique slipped some illegal goods into the cargo container with your merchandise."

He tried to cover his relief at her dumb explanation with a frown of concern. "That's terrible. What kind of goods? Drugs?"

"Stolen antiquities," said Pierce. "Mixed right in with yours."

"We could really use your help to sort everything out," Layla added. She lowered her gaze and forced herself to sound deferential. "That is, if you can spare the time."

He puffed up in response. “Certainly. Let me just tell my staff.”

As he went to the back office, the women exchanged a quick smile. The good cop/bad cop routine couldn’t have gone better if they’d scripted it. Farwadi returned and they escorted him out to the car. Pierce opened the door for their suspect. Sounding bored, she began to recite, “You have the right to remain silent ...”

He reacted with alarm, his eyes darting to Layla for help. She simpered and reassured him, “It doesn’t mean you’re under arrest. Agent Pierce is just following procedure.” Agent Pierce was, in fact, covering their asses, making sure that anything Farwadi might say in the car would eventually be admissible in court. If the case even went to court. Layla had seen enough good testimony get thrown out for stupid reasons to appreciate the senior agent’s caution.

Back at 26 Federal Plaza, the agents flashed their credentials at the main desk. Farwadi emptied his pockets into a plastic bin and stepped through the metal detector. When he tried to retrieve his belongings, Pierce held them back. “We’ll just keep those for you up front,” she said. Then she added with a small laugh, “Don’t worry, nobody’s going to search your phone.”

*Only because she doesn’t have a warrant, thought Layla. At least, not yet.*

The gallery owner seemed to grow more nervous as they escorted him into the main office, across the large FBI emblem inlaid in the tile floor, past rows of desks where agents and administrative staff were working.

Pierce opened the door to the more comfortable of two interrogation rooms. The chairs were padded, if a bit threadbare, and not bolted to the floor. She pulled one over to the rectangular table. “Have a seat. We’ll get the pictures of those antiquities,” said Pierce.

She and Layla left Farwadi glancing nervously at the mirrored section of the wall, which anyone who’d ever seen a cop show would know must be one-way glass.

Outside the door they nearly collided with Tom Monaghan.

“Ellen!” he said jovially. “Thanks for bringing him in.”

She stared at him. “What?”

The big agent gestured toward the interrogation room. “Farwadi. The Muharib’s money man.”

“He’s not ... What the hell are you talking about?”

“Farwadi’s name is on the manifest for that shipping container. I checked.” Monaghan grinned. He was enjoying himself. “It’s like you said. He can get a lot of money for those little green vases. And that means a lot of Kalashnikovs for the Muharib.” He shot a look at Layla.

Pierce collected herself and spoke calmly. “You know there’s more to it than that. The money passes through a lot of different hands ...”

He was shaking his head. “Tell you what. I’ll let Farwadi explain it to me.” He started to move around her toward the interrogation room door, but she stayed in his way.

“Forget it. This is my interview, and my case.”

They stood there for a moment, face-to-face. Pierce was nearly his height, but Monaghan had more bulk. He leaned in close. “You made ‘your’ case part of a joint operation. Specifically, a Joint Terrorism Task Force operation. Which puts you on my turf, sweetheart. I’ll handle it from here.”

She opened her mouth to object, then closed it again. As the ASAC of Counterterrorism, he outranked her in the JTTF hierarchy. Pierce stepped aside. Monaghan smiled. He gestured toward the door of the observation room. “You’re welcome to watch me interrogate the suspect if you like.” Then he went into the interrogation room and closed the door.

Layla watched Pierce's jaw work as she fought to hold back her frustration. Without a word, the senior agent stepped into the observation room. Layla followed. It was a long, narrow space that might have been a supply closet at some point, barely large enough for two people to sit at a low table and look into the interview room through the glass. Monaghan was flipping through a case file. Through a speaker on the wall, they heard him say, "Mr. Farwadi, I'm Special Agent Monaghan."

"What happened to ...?"

"The lovely Agent Pierce? Called away on another case. You'll be dealing with me from now on." He paged through the file. "Tell me about the Muharib."

Farwadi stared at him. "What?" he managed.

"You know, the people you were going to sell those pretty little trinkets for."

"That's not true."

The big agent leaned closer. "Work with me here, Nesim. This is your one and only chance to get ahead of this mess."

Pierce approached the one-way glass, talking to Monaghan even though she knew he couldn't hear. "That's good. Now start with the easy stuff."

"So ... back to the Muharib," he said, pleasantly enough.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath.

Sweat appeared on Farwadi's forehead. "I don't know anything about the Muharib ..."

"We know they're planning something in the US."

"I swear to you, I don't ..."

"Nesim." Monaghan stood, looming over the smaller man. "We're not going to get along if you lie to me."

Farwadi faced him for a long moment, then looked away. "I don't think I should say anything else without consulting my attorney."

The agent backed off. "Okay. If that's the way you want to play this ..." He went out into the main office.

Pierce snapped off the loudspeaker in frustration. "Farwadi doesn't know anything about the Muharib."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I know this guy. I've been studying him for a year and a half." She began to pace the cramped room. "And I know how the illegal antiquities market works. There's a long chain of suppliers and middlemen between the poor guy who digs up the treasure and the rich asshole who ends up putting it on his mantelpiece. Everyone in the chain knows the links on either side of them, but not beyond that." Pierce scanned the room for visual aids. She found a pen on the floor and pulled a folded FBI memo from her back pocket.

She smoothed out the paper on the narrow table, blank side up. "On one end, you have a group like the Muharib," she began, and drew an elongated circle to represent the first link. "They're sitting in a sandbox full of ancient relics that they want to turn into cash. So they hire some local guys to dig up an illegal site or go ransack a museum." She drew a second link beside the first, overlapping at one end.

Through the glass, Layla saw Monaghan bring in a cell phone and toss it at Farwadi. She focused her attention back on Pierce. "The hired guys get their hands on something valuable ... maybe a ritual amphora from the Temple of Horus. They take it to a local dealer they trust." She sketched a third circle, representing the dealer. "He buys it from them, no questions asked, for maybe a couple hundred bucks. Doesn't sound like much, I know, but if they sell enough pieces, it adds up. The money goes through them, back to the Muharib." She drew a line through the second link, back to the first. "So, this dealer doesn't know who he's really bankrolling."

“Although he must have a pretty good idea,” said Layla.

“Of course he does. But he doesn’t say that when he passes along the amphora to someone else to smuggle out of the country.” Pierce put a fourth circle beside the third, their ends overlapping. “The smuggler sells it to another dealer, who sells it to another one, then to another ...” she said, running a squiggly line all over the page. “Everybody jacks up the price enough to make a profit, and the original provenance of the amphora gets lost along the way.” She ended the squiggle in a fifth circle, connected to the fourth. “It finally ends up getting stashed in a shipping container full of otherwise legitimate cargo, on its way to a ritzy art gallery. The gallery owner”—she nodded toward the interrogation room—“makes up whatever story he likes about the fascinating history of the item, and sells it for half a million dollars to some clueless rich guy who puts it on display in the foyer of his penthouse and shows it off to his friends.” Her pen dug into the paper as she outlined the last circle, then jabbed it again for emphasis.

They both looked at Farwadi through the one-way glass. He was talking on the phone, presumably to his lawyer, his face damp with sweat. Layla glanced at Pierce, reluctant to make what seemed like an obvious suggestion. “I know you’ve been trying to put this guy in jail for a while ...”

“But I should cut a deal with him for information,” she finished, with a resigned nod. “Yeah. I know.”

Layla followed her out of the observation room and into the main office, where Monaghan was pacing like a hungry lion by the interrogation room door. Pierce approached him. “So much for the intimidation approach.”

He turned on her, as if he might actually sink his teeth into her throat. “I suppose you want to offer him a deal.”

“Unless you want to try waterboarding him for a while,” she said. Layla struggled to keep a straight face. “But he still won’t be able to introduce you to the Muharib.”

“I know that!” he snapped. “I’m trying to choke off their cash flow.”

“So am I!” They glared in furious agreement.

In the tense silence, Layla spoke up, her voice perfectly calm. “Then use him as an informant and destroy the whole fucking network from the top down.”

The senior agents stared at her. Then Pierce turned to Monaghan. “Works for me.”

“If you want to run him out of this office, you’ll do it under my supervision,” he informed her.

Pierce hesitated. “Farwadi does have contacts in New York,” she said carefully. “But he knows a lot more people ... important people ... in Cairo.”

“Cairo,” he repeated. “No way. There’s too much corruption in the Intelligence Directorate. If you try to run a covert op with them, your guy is as good as dead.”

“I know,” said Pierce. “So maybe we don’t have to tell the Intelligence Directorate.”

Now he laughed. “One problem with that, sweetheart. It’s completely fucking illegal for the FBI to operate independently on foreign soil.”

“That hasn’t stopped you before.” Layla was surprised by her own words. They were true, but flinging them at the ASAC of Counterterrorism was a different matter. Monaghan appeared equally stunned. But that could soon give way to anger. “I translate incoming messages from agents all over the world. Including the covert strike team in Syria. And the intelligence operative in North Korea ...”

“That’s enough,” he said, but his voice remained calm.

Pierce pressed her advantage. “We’ll keep it simple. Six months, tops.”

“Simple?” The big agent barked out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, they all start out like that.”



...

The Arts Council fundraiser was being held in the Coriander Gallery, a large industrial warehouse-turned-studio space. Colored lights played over cement walls and tastefully exposed pipes as speakers thumped out a techno beat. As Layla walked in, she could almost imagine she was in a trendy SoHo club. Not that she'd ever been much of a club rat. At least, not as the studious, responsible Layla el-Deeb. But tonight, she was Layla Nawar, strutting across the room in a low-cut red dress with spike heels to match, drawing admiring stares from men and women alike. She found a group of the party kids, including Jehan, Chloe, and Adrian Goldman, hanging out by a photo display showing the stages of the Coriander's transformation.

When Jehan saw her, she let out a low whistle. "Wow." She took Layla's hand and twirled her around.

"You're looking pretty hot yourself," said Layla. Her new friend was dressed in slim black pants that emphasized her long legs and a decidedly un-conservative black halter top. No hijab. She wore a striking jade pendant shaped like a scarab. "That's gorgeous. Is it new?"

"My mom gave it to me for my birthday." Jehan shrugged, smiling. "I have to admit, the woman knows her bling."

Across the room, Layla saw someone who looked familiar, although she couldn't immediately place him. He was fiftyish, with blue eyes and thick, gray hair, dressed in jeans, a casual tan blazer, and very expensive brown loafers. He wasn't exactly handsome but radiated enough confidence to make up for it. She realized suddenly where she'd seen the man's picture: on Pierce's suspect board. His name was Bennett Rothkopf. And he was connected to a lot of other pictures on that board.

Jehan saw who she was looking at. "If you're into collecting, you should meet Bennett Rothkopf. He has a terrific gallery downtown."

He was talking animatedly with a few other well-dressed society types. But the man standing beside him was different. He wasn't part of the conversation. He had dark hair, broad shoulders, and muscles that strained the tight sleeves of his black sport coat. "Who's that next to him?"

Jehan peered closer. "Don't know. Someone he works with, I think?" She turned back to Layla. "And you have to meet his son James. He works in the gallery, too, restoring art. Kinda serious. You'd like him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Layla asked, wondering if she'd been letting too much of all-business Agent el-Deeb show. She needed to focus on being more flighty.

She had a good role model in Jehan, who had ignored her question and was now standing on tiptoes, scanning the room from a slightly higher vantage point. "I don't see him," she said. Layla followed her gaze and saw a young, serious-looking Egyptian man heading toward them. Jehan clearly spotted him, too.

"Oh, shit, it's Youssef," she said with a roll of her eyes. "He's a 'nice, respectable boy' who works for my dad. My folks are already planning the wedding." She grabbed Layla's hand and pulled her in the opposite direction. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To meet Bennett," said Jehan, as if this were beyond obvious.

As they approached Rothkopf, the man next to him edged forward, as if to protect him from the two incoming girls. He had olive skin and dark brown eyes, but it was hard to even guess at his ethnicity. Or his age, for that matter. Layla thought she'd figured out his job,

though: bodyguard. And not one you wanted to mess with. Rothkopf spotted them and smiled.

“Jehan! Lovely to see you.” He kissed her on both cheeks, as the other man stepped back.

“This is my friend Layla.”

“Pleased to meet you. Bennett Rothkopf.” He extended his hand. Up close, she could see that his blue eyes were flecked with green. She also noticed the deep worry lines between his eyebrows.

“Have you been to the Coriander before, Layla?” he asked her.

“No, I haven’t.”

“It’s a communal space for artists, where they can work on their own projects and be inspired by others.” He gestured to the paintings and sculptures in progress with obvious pride. “Art is a powerful form of communication. Sometimes more powerful than words.” He spoke with great conviction, and Layla honestly couldn’t tell if he was sincere or if this was a performance intended to persuade them to donate more money. Pierce’s file on Rothkopf had described him as a self-made man who convinced early investors to believe in him while he was still struggling to pay the rent. Layla could see why. He was a good salesman. Which would also make him a good liar.

They began to hear raised voices from a hallway leading toward the gallery offices—a woman with a distinctly Australian accent shouted, “No! Leave me alone!”

Rothkopf looked up, concerned. “I hope that’s nothing serious.”

“It sounds like our friend Chloe,” Jehan told him. “Don’t worry. We’ve got this.” She headed off toward the hallway, nodding for Layla to join her.

From a professional standpoint, she knew she should stay and keep talking to the person who was on her suspect wall. But socialite Layla Nawar would go with her friend.

“It was really nice to meet you,” she said to Bennett. “I’d love to see your gallery sometime.”

“Come by whenever you like” he said, turning the warmth of his smile up several degrees. “It would be my honor to show you around.”

Layla couldn’t help smiling back before she turned and hurried after Jehan. They left the main gallery space and found themselves in a long concrete corridor surrounded by small offices and studios. “Fuck you!” came Chloe’s strangled cry from a room at the other end of the hallway, followed by a chorus of voices. Layla stopped short as she watched Jehan rush toward the commotion as if she were running into a burning building to rescue a child. It was ridiculous. These people led such charmed lives that a little relationship drama seemed like the end of the world. She knew she should follow Jehan and join the others, but the thought was exhausting.

She turned away from the sound of Jehan’s voice joining the fray and was startled to find that she wasn’t alone. A handsome guy with tousled brown hair, broad shoulders, and deep blue eyes was leaning against the concrete wall, smiling at her. There was something familiar about him, though she couldn’t put her finger on what it was.

“You’re missing all the action,” he said, and she picked up an American accent.

“So are you,” Layla pointed out with a small shrug. “I guess I’m not used to people putting their private lives on display.”

He laughed and her stomach did a tiny involuntary flip. “Clearly you’re new to Cairo, or at least to this crowd.” He studied her for a moment. “I’m guessing you’re the Layla Nawar I’ve been hearing about?” He extended his hand. “James.”

“Oh!” Layla took his hand, registering its warmth and softness. Worried she was holding it too long or too firmly, she let his hand drop and smoothed the front of her dress. “James Rothkopf? I just met the other Rothkopf. Your dad.”

“I’m the more interesting one.” He grinned.

“I’m sure you are,” Layla said with a laugh. Now she saw the Rothkopf resemblance. The dimple, the intense eyes, the warmth of the smile.

James peered beyond her down the hall, glanced behind him, and then said, “Hey, do you want to see something amazing?”

“Definitely.”

He gave her a conspiratorial look, almost mischievous. “Follow me.”

He took her hand and led her, quickly, down the labyrinthine hallway toward the gallery but turned off down a shorter hallway of small studios. Butterflies, faint ones, were stirring to life in her stomach. It was a sensation she hadn’t felt in a long time.

James paused at a closed door. Glancing around again, he turned the handle, and ushered her inside. He quietly shut the door behind them.

The room was dark, and she felt rather than saw him reach past her to switch on a small lamp. Layla blinked and took in her surroundings. “Are we supposed to be in here?” she asked.

“No,” said James. “This is all under wraps for another week.”

Layla’s heart pulsed fast, keeping time with the distant throb of the music from the party. Along the back of the room were tables filled with pottery that was scarred with gold—as if the pieces had been smashed and glued back together with glittering adhesive. Hanging on one wall was a rack of fabrics, rent into shreds and then re-stitched with gold thread. She walked the perimeter of the room, taking everything in; she could feel James’s eyes on her, appraising her.

“What is all this?” she asked.

“You’re having a sneak peek at the upcoming Coriander Gallery exhibit,” said James.

“Yours?”

“Oh, God no.” He laughed. “It’s a collective of international artists inspired by the Japanese kintsukuroi technique.”

“Kintsukuroi?” She searched for the closest English translation and asked, “Golden ... repair?”

“Yes! You’ve heard of it?”

“Vaguely.”

James crossed the small room in a few strides and joined her in front of the pottery. “It’s this really cool process where cracks are repaired with gold.” He reached out to touch a vase, softly, letting his fingers trace a golden line on a crack around its neck, down its curved body to the base. Layla shivered, watching his fingers, and suddenly wished she had a wrap so she could disguise the goose bumps that had risen on her arms.

“The artists in this exhibit were inspired by this centuries-old repair technique,” James went on. “They’re so talented,” he added with a wistful expression. “Look at the precision of the gold inlay here. As a restorer, I know the hours that went into getting this perfect.” He let his hand fall away from the vase.

Layla traced the line his fingers had just followed, all the while conscious of his proximity to her. She picked up an Isis statuette—a lightweight copy of a relic, she guessed—and inspected its golden patterns. “So you’re a restorer at your dad’s gallery?” she asked carefully. “Do you use this technique in any of your work?”

“Are you kidding?” He smirked. “I often think it would be a *relief* to do kintsukuroi. Everything I do has to look perfect. Museums and collectors of antiquities don’t want any

artistic liberties. They want as close to original condition as possible. But that's why I'm here in Cairo."

"What do you mean?" Layla pressed him.

"Learning from the best in the business, getting access to authentic materials, and improving my craft while helping out my dad," said James. "It's an incredible feeling to repair something ancient so seamlessly that it's completely invisible to the naked eye. Kind of makes me feel like I got away with something each time I pull it off." He smiled at her and she felt her cheeks warm.

He spoke about his work with an intensity that made her ache. She hadn't realized how much she missed talking about work like it mattered. It occurred to her that James Rothkopf was the only young person in the Cairo social scene who appeared to have gainful employment.

"So you work for perfection," said Layla, "but you appreciate flawed objects, like this." She handed him the Isis statuette.

"Not flawed. Historical," he corrected, tracing the gold lines with one finger. "The damage is part of the object, and the gold calls attention to it. When the scars are made visible, the object becomes even more beautiful and unique. With kintsukuroi, you're celebrating an object's history." Gesturing around the room, he said, "These are all things that could have been tossed in the trash, but they survived, and were made better. That's the philosophy, anyway. And I think this group of artists really gets it right." He set the Isis statuette back on the table. "Probably the general public won't totally appreciate all that. I guess I just wanted to make sure someone did." He smiled sheepishly and scratched his head, suddenly looking embarrassed. "Sorry for dragging you over here. Maybe this isn't your thing. I'm sure you didn't come to this party tonight for an art lecture."

"No! No, it's fine. I mean—I like it. A lot." She turned slowly and took in the contents of the room through fresh eyes. Through James's eyes. The collection of ceramics with their spider webs of gold dazzled in the light.

James turned to look at her again, and she felt a warmth spread through her, as if she, too, were suffused with gold. She wondered if he could see her damaged parts, the breaks in her story, just by looking at her. She laughed at the idea. How crazy was that?

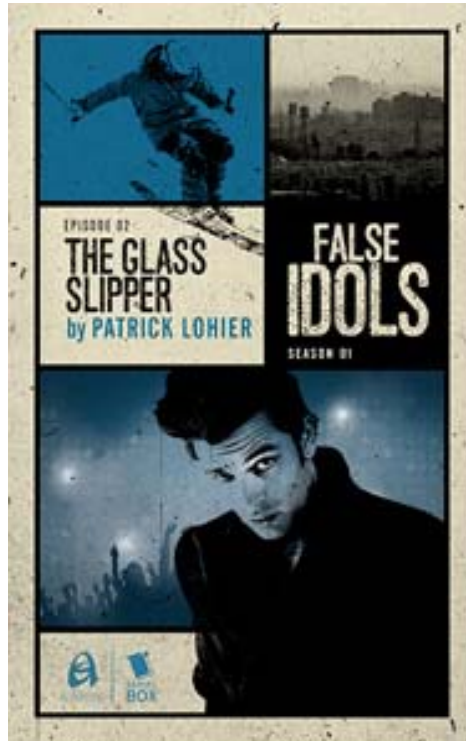
The sly grin returned to James's face. "What?" he prompted.

"Nothing." She smiled to herself as he held the door open for her. The secret exhibit must have cast a weird spell over her. Time for a reality check. James was the son of Bennett Rothkopf. He worked in his dad's gallery. He knew the world of relics and collectors, and could be really helpful to her investigation. He was definitely someone worth getting to know—so long as she could keep those butterflies in check.



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A careless mistake



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