

From the Forthcoming Novel

# The Last Book of Baghdad

It's when desperation is mistaken for evil that evil becomes most desperate.

It is said that,  
“Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads.”

# 1

*Baghdad, Iraq April 2007*

Head low, Fareed hurried through the busy streets where bullet casings were as common as dropped pocket change. He counted the brass cylinders as he walked past the waist-high concrete barriers and the fire-damaged post office that still smelled like burned paper. He avoided eye contact. Avoided having to speak to anyone unnecessary. Darting through broad intersections, he listened for gunfire and speeding convoys, but the afternoon's violence only came in subtle traces of distant smoke—oily char that settled into his hair and burrowed its way under his fingernails and made his limbs feel warmly calcified.

Opportunities for danger were everywhere, but Fareed knew to listen intently and pay attention and he would be fine. He kicked the seventeenth bullet shell he passed. Brass chime on the wind.

He zipped his denim jacket high, hiding the carving knife and the precious, plastic-wrapped book inside.

Making his way towards the book market, he'd seen so many stray animals that had died from malnourishment. They littered the city. Dogs and cats like marionettes thrown from moving cars. Draped on curbs, fur sapped and stained. Though they were dead, Fareed listened to what they might have said. *Hello sir, hello. Can you hear me? Please bury me under the window where I used to sit at night and wait for the boy I loved. Is he still there, too? Hello?* It made him wonder why he hadn't adopted a dog or cat of his own. Then he remembered he would have to feed it, and where would that food come from?

The afternoon was warm for April. Fareed unzipped his jacket but not enough to expose the book or the knife hidden inside. Sweat speckled his forehead. He wiped it dry with his sleeve and pressed his palm to his ribs to feel the outline of the knife through the worn denim, the book acting as a one-sided sheath.

At the end of the block, he leaned on a drainpipe, picked his ear, flicked away the wax, and listened before leaving the sidewalk, walking quietly so he might hear whimpers or snorts, anything from the dead dog. Traffic clogged the adjacent street. Cars exchanged honks, making him cringe.

Fareed squinted behind him to the street soaked with heat. No one was following. On his right was a long alley that cut straight to the book market and Al Mutanabbi Street. This was an

alley he could run through quickly if needed—*keep your eyes open and run*, he thought—*just run*.

“Hey!” he called, filling the alley with echo. It was as if he could travel through the space using his voice and not have to physically put himself there.

Stepping into the alley’s shade, Fareed could see a coiled lump of something among the strewn trash. Alive or once alive.

“Hello?” he called.

Fareed stepped closer.

He reached into his jacket and gripped the knife’s handle.

From a distance, Fareed thought the pinkish skin might be human, someone young. He knew it was a real possibility. A dumped body. But stepping closer, it was obvious the animal, too small to be a child. It had crawled out of the sun to die alone. Snout tucked under its front paw. Its fur, aged by neglect and mange, but also burnt in large patches across its sides and back. Fareed took a few steps closer and knelt beside it. He listened.

Fareed unzipped his jacket and slid out his knife.

*If I can stab an animal, he thought, I can stab a man. I can defend myself. From anyone. Unless they have a gun.*

Fareed zipped his jacket back up, the book safe inside. Sweat dripped from his upper lip. He huffed the greasy air through his mouth because he wouldn’t dare let his nose smell the alley, the blocked intestines of the city where wind and sewage pumped chicken bones and wilted cardboard, spoiled milk an afternoon away from disease, all of these alleys backing up the bowels of Baghdad so no barber or mechanic or police could breathe.

Fareed heaved. Breath held. The knife's tip dimpled the pudgy skin under the dog's spine—*if I can*, he thought—a thread of blood then—*I could kill if*—he jerked the knife forward, puncturing deep, not expecting the pressure inside the cavity to burst. Quickened blood gushed like old coffee onto the asphalt. Half the blade disappeared inside the dog. Fareed let go. Fingers seized. And, as if a hand guided it, the pressure inside the dog pushed the knife back out, opening for even more blood. The knife lay still on the asphalt, clang fading from the alley.

“Oh,” was all Fareed could say, stepping back.

A gunshot cracked down the street, booming off the alley walls. Fareed jumped and stumbled back and caught himself—convinced he had been shot. His trembling hands patted his chest and ribs. Rubbed his scalp and neck. Nothing.

Fareed looked down at the dog's wound. Dark red bubbles foamed at the slit's seam.

He looked again to each end of the alley.

It wasn't long before Fareed noticed the wetness. From his crotch down the front of his right thigh, soaked though—cooling in the April heat. He pinched a dry spot above his knee and shook his pant leg, looking to the windows above to make sure no one had seen.

“Are you kidding me?” he said to himself. Fareed couldn't remember the last time he pissed himself. Or if he ever had out of fright. All this did was make him feel old and feeble.

“Allah, help me now,” he whispered. “Allah, help me now.” He looked down at the deflating dog in its puddle. “This is what I deserve.”

Fareed wiped the knife on a piece of newspaper.

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It wasn't abnormal to see a grown man soaked with something walking through the streets of Baghdad. The residents of Firdos Square, and the cab drivers and merchants who collected there, even Saddam's old statue—now just a lonely pair of boots left on a pedestal—had seen just about everything. Fareed, not trying to hide his sopped pants, wondered about those boots and if the statue of Saddam missed them from time to time, laying in the dust with no shoes. His probably missed his hands and his head, too. The devil was gone now. That is what mattered.

Fareed blinked at the late evening sky.

Curfew was hours away.

Cautious, Fareed stuck to main streets and avoided checkpoints set up randomly block by block, walking sometimes in the street where he felt safe from the possible abduction from some passerby. *Who would kidnap a man who pisses himself*, he thought, and tried to laugh. On the opposite side of the four lane road, a convoy of Humvees swerved between traffic, too fast for begging children to run after. Fareed made no effort to stare.

A cab pulled up beside him. "You need a ride, man?" The driver yelled. "Half price! Quarter price!" Fareed was only a few meters away.

"No. Thank you. Just going to the river," Fareed said.

But the driver had sped away before Fareed could finish, the car radio blaring.

"Allah, help me now."

Wet fabric suctioned to his leg. He made his way to the river.

Boys plunged into the great Tigris. They summersaulted and back flipped with Olympic fervor, waiting for every other boys' eyes to lock on them before leaping into the cool April

water. Their hoots warded off all danger. They didn't care. Helicopters like hornets in the distance. Sky malted with sulfurous smoke.

Choosing an unclaimed patch of shoreline, Fareed made sure no soldiers or Mahdi militia had seen. He took off his jacket and shirt, shoes and socks, and he folded it all in a stack on top of his knife and the book carried from work. He made sure the knife was clean before resting it on the book's cover, promised himself to wade close to the shore in case someone threatened to steal his belongings. He didn't mind walking home shirtless as long as the book was safe.

"Watch me! Watch!" a boy called, waiting for his friends to turn, some of them paying no attention. The boy dove perfectly. Surfaced after a few seconds, smiling.

Evening's call to prayer began filling the city. Facing the way he'd faced for over forty years, Fareed murmured the *Adhan* to himself along with the loudspeakers, bowing slightly, each minaret broadcasting loud so that no devout Muslim would be excluded.

Fareed stepped into the river, avoiding sharp rocks and debris. He splashed his face and shoulders, his chest and sides. Washed his scalp and ears under the sun's stare. His pants cleansed of his shame. Nothing to hide in the eyes of Allah. Everything washed away.

# 2

*Al Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad — April, 2007*

Nisreen had been holding her phone when it rang, making her jump. She stared at the incoming number, unfamiliar with the suffix. Prepared herself—peering out her kitchen window at the other city she barely recognized—no unfamiliar cars and people below. Nisreen unplugged the charger from the cell phone even though there had been no electricity all day. It was safest to keep it plugged in to take advantage of those rare hours of normalcy, when lights and radios and refrigerator surged alive.

She opened the phone and waited. Listened. Hand trembling. Typically the kidnapers said nothing at first. They would wait for her—silently taunting. The men who had her husband.

“Hello?”

“Nisreen,” the voice crackled through the cell phone, “...everything is destroyed.” The voice paused. “It’s all gone.” Someone else in the background was crying.



This wasn't the phone call she had been waiting for. Not the kidnappers or anyone they had hired to call.

"Asmaa? What's wrong? I told you *not* to call me on this phone," Nisreen said, backing away from the window. "I'm waiting for a phone call."

"Everything!" Asmaa cried, the phone traveling away from her voice as if Asmaa were being carried off by her own emotions.

"Out! Out!" someone yelled over the line.

"Who? What are you talking about?" Nisreen said, sitting down then standing before her knees were fully relaxed. "Hello?"

Silence overtook the line before Fadi's gruff voice commanded her attention, his typical politeness had been carried off too.

"Just get down here as soon as you can, Nisreen. I'm calling you from the café on the corner." He covered the receiver and shouted and charged back again. "Just get here."

Ambulance sirens made it impossible to hear the rest.

"Nisreen?" Fadi yelled. "Hey!"

"Why aren't you calling from the store? Are you okay?"

More silence.

"We will rebuild the store, *inshallah*. We will be okay."

\* \* \* \*

Checking her cell phone, there was enough battery life to keep it on for a few hours if it wasn't used to talk or text. Nisreen locked the apartment and hurried downstairs, hands trembling

along the banister, eyes adjusting to the afternoon light. She couldn't help but look on the ground, by her door, for mail that never came.

She checked her phone one last time before pocketing it. She seemed like the only person her age that preferred to text. No one else seemed to get it.

“Nisreen!” a neighbor called.

But she pretended not to hear.

“Did you hear?” he called again.

Rushing toward Al Mutanabbi Street, Asmaa's voice still speeding her step, Nisreen passed lone men and couples hurrying from one problem to the next. No one stopped to linger. She wasn't ashamed to walk alone.

Had the two bombs she'd heard earlier in the morning been outside Fadi's bookstore? It was unthinkable. After four years of bombing she didn't entertain hypotheticals long enough to make her upset. *Or was it three bombs this morning?*

In the book of Nisreen's head, in the book that no one had ever bothered to ask to read, it would be told like this—Al Mutanabbi Street, splendid and spiced with copious dust, verdant with words sprouting from downspouts and windowsills, was a living book. She knew this the second she stepped foot there nine years ago. It was the reason she had left Fallujah for Baghdad and had never gone back.

Back then, she visited Al Mutanabbi Street almost every day.

“This *isn't* a place where you sit and read for free all afternoon,” Fadi had said, leaning out his shop entrance, years before he had a belly to rest his cup of tea on, before his oversized

sweaters made him look old. He had waved the cup at Nisreen. He seemed more confident than with his shaggy hair.

“You mean,” Nisreen said, looking up, “a library?”

“This isn’t a *comfortable* library with *comfortable* library chairs for *comfortable* academics.”

Nisreen remember she had snickered and regretted it.

Fadi was right. This was a place where dangerous words, revolutionary words—deliciously treasonous—were coveted and protected from censorship. This was a free zone for the curious and brave. If a student solicited Fadi properly, those words could become the student’s words, too. Nisreen knew.

She stooped to one knee and swapped the book she was reading for another, one of hundreds lined like terracotta tiles on the rugs in front of Fadi’s store. She kept reading. Wind swept sand tickled her toes.

More modest when they first met, Fadi sipped and hid his smile under his cup.

If Al Mutanabbi Street were a living book, then Fadi was the first poem, or the first Nisreen would read, over and over, misinterpreting, misjudging, until later, after coming by his bookstore once a week for three months, he would ask her what she liked to read and lend her the first of many books.

“Take it home and read it *comfortably*.” He winked.

But he wasn’t a creep. He did smell like cigarettes.

Other unwritten poems in the book of Nisreen’s head praised the crowds of people on Al Mutanabbi Street crouching at the edges of rugs, some rugs stretching from storefront to

curbside, each person with their nose in a volume of verse or haggling over the price of a hardbound classic. Shoulder to shoulder. Bartering. Some almost begging.

“This is a used book at a new price!”

“You are holding a collector’s item! That is the price!”

“Crook!”

“Simpleton!”

But it was all in goodwill.

Some of the poems in her head wrote themselves.

Though no other place made her so joyful, Nisreen respected the brevity of the book market. Men knelt and studied words as if praying. Woman searched, soundless, for the perfect novel. No one could look quite too jolly in the presence of such copious and renowned knowledge, no matter who they were—academic, poet, student, or plumber—professional writer or hobbyist—all of them were focused within the prayer of printed script.

Back then, Fadi had asked her, “Why would a nurse from Fallujah want a job at a bookstore?”

Nisreen had her answer prepared, stating it plainly without a single stutter. “Because I love books, not dying people.”

“Ah, but languages die every day,” Fadi forced a stern look.

“Then I’m here to save them.”

At first he gave her a job for store credit. A few months later she was promoted to assistant manager with a proper salary.

“I deal with the customers,” Fadi insisted, “you... don’t have the persuasive finesse I do. Years of work. Years of practice. Okay?”

She was okay. Very okay. Bookkeeping and inventory filled her hours along with endless people watching.

She let her mind wander, happy to be dreaming the unwritten sonnets that celebrated the dust filtered light in the morning. How the street opened quickly. She watched the regulars—men dressed like Bedouins—who hunted for unread gems from trusted dealers. She daydreamed verses about afternoon-long crushes on men too young to be interested in her. Graduate students and young professors. Their trimmed beards. Men she let her imagination take home with her. After only a few months in Baghdad, Al Mutanabbi felt like her street, loving all of it. The handwritten signs. Antiques from forgotten empires. Leftover treasures. Smells of kabob and bread baked out in the open. Motorbikes swerving around stray cats, paperbacks strapped to handlebars. The cafés that invited her to lounge for hours after work as long as she kept refilling her tea.

Sometimes men approached her. Sometimes they were as smart as she was. And the exhilaration that had left her after receiving her college diploma began to return—a feeling she never realized how much she missed.

\* \* \* \*

Smoke was the first cause for alarm. Over the rooftops toward Al Mutanabbi Street, rose oily black flumes—the signature of a car bomb. Nisreen ran, preparing herself for what she might see.

Three men dragged a scooter out of the way of an ambulance creeping closer to the blast. Nisreen ran past, looked for Fadi and Asmaa, checked her phone. Shifting wind draped her eyes and mouth in smoke and she covered herself and ran to the café on the corner. From there she could see.

Al Mutanabbi Street was destroyed.

“Allah,” she gasped. “No.” A hand to her face.

Asmaa was suddenly by her side, hugging her in the dust. Fadi stood close behind with another shop owner.

“Everything,” Asmaa kept repeating. It seemed like she was trying to turn Nisreen away, trying to spare her the sight.

Besides the pillars lining the street, the market was unrecognizable—a mountain range of rubble. Five storefronts, including Fadi’s, were blown inward, walls and windows pulverized. Scorched ceiling tile warped and still burning. Nisreen looked to the sky. Pages fluttered and stuck to buildings. A paperback smoldered on a car’s hood. Ocher dust coated every window. Nothing around the crater had survived.

Gathering ashes already erased the color of the remaining signage. Gray dust to gray dirt.

Two medics carried a man in their arms. Every stretcher had been used. They passed two bookshops that hadn’t taken the brunt of the blast where the owners stacked volumes into boxes, eyeing the streets for looters.

Onlookers—people from the neighborhood and beyond—covered their faces with shirts and *keffiyehs* and held one another. The cultural heart of Baghdad had been cut out.

Nisreen hadn't expected to feel sick. Her chest pounded. She covered her mouth, taking deep breaths, holding back tears that seemed to well up from her lungs.

Crying, she stepped away from her friends.

Police in pickup trucks rolled through the rubble, some of them hoping off the bed for a quick survey. The men behind the guns mounted turret aimed at rooftops. They didn't blare their sirens. There was no reason to call attention to themselves and, watching them dissolve into the smoke soaked distance, Nisreen was taken by the slow, lunar-like stillness for the aftermath. She was already trying to remove the images from her mind. This stillness made it impossible as if someone was forcing her to stare at photographs of the disaster.

Fadi's voice whispered over her shoulder, "If the Golden Mosque wasn't enough, they had to take this from us, too."

Fadi always saved his breath for sentences like that.

Nisreen couldn't look at him. You still have Asmaa, she wanted to say. What do I have left?

Fadi held their shoulders. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

That night her dreams were of screaming fire.

\* \* \* \*

Of the twenty-six that died that day, Nisreen knew three—personally or in passing—and one by reputation.

She left her apartment the next day to return to Al Mutanabbi Street and walked from shop to shop, stopping to pick up partially burned books that she dropped back into the rubble. Anything salvageable was already gone. Nisreen walked, remembering the names of the dead, and recited the *Sorat Al fatiha*.

Hilo she remembered most clearly. His nickname—Hilo. He was a regular shopper, picky about the condition of his book's cover and spine, always dusting off and straightening shelves. He wouldn't consider anything with a torn cover. Even dog-eared pages were unacceptable. And he was the only man Nisreen knew who used real bookmarks—tasseled and ornate ones—instead of loose pieces of paper or a pen. He kept extra plastic bags in his backpack to wrap his purchases in so they wouldn't get scuffed on the way home.

Nisreen crouched. What she thought was a fragment of Fadi's shop sign was a piece of plywood discolored by fire. She chucked it into a blown out doorway. This was where she'd first heard Hilo ask, "How do I check out the books in the middle?"

He'd meant the ones displayed on the rug in front of the store, too deeply lined up to reach. Together, they formed a giant grid.

It was a good question, Nisreen thought.

"Fadi!" she had called needing an answer from her boss.

*Where was Hilo when the bomb detonated? What was the last word he read?*

She walked further.

Yusra Talaa died in the blast that day, too. Yusra was a media junky. Opening her bag to stash her new books, she'd show Nisreen the bootleg DVDs she'd bought that day.



“This is the second season of *The Sopranos*,” she had whispered. “If I lived in America, I’d want to be in their crime family.”

Nisreen never knew if she was serious or not. Tony Soprano was just another Saddam. Yusra wanted novels written by Western authors—thrillers, crime dramas, horror stories, anything to do with lawyers—and she knew exactly where to score Xeroxed copies of these forbidden stories banned by Saddam years ago.

“You aren’t afraid of getting caught with those?” Nisreen asked, Saddam’s secret prisons always in the backs of people’s minds.

Yusra would shrug her shoulders, looking over each before closing her bag. She was an honorary *Soprano* after all.

And there was Ra’ad Jafar. A physics professor at Baghdad University. Thin and awkward and somehow completely unconcerned with his premature balding. He had more nervous ticks than Nisreen could catalog. Foot tapping. Shoulder jumping. Some weird whistle when he couldn’t capture a thought. But he had paid for her tea one day at a local café, taking the opportunity to talk for a minute after seeing Nisreen, barefoot, relaxed, reading under the outdoor awnings.

“Hello,” he had said. His nervousness was charming at first—then, as it failed to fade, annoying and childish and finally off-putting. He had asked her out on a date. Nisreen thought to herself, if he scratches his ear or taps his foot one more time, I will say *no*.

Eventually she had to tell him she was interested in someone else. That was the truth. Nisreen didn’t mention that it was another professor at Baghdad University. Ahmed.

But Ra’ad was sweet to buy her tea a few more times, never pushing her for another date.

Nisreen walked on. Clouds parted for the midmorning sun. Unmade beds of bombed rubble grew out of storefronts and alleys.

Among the four dead there was a poet she'd never met. She had heard about him in cafés, particularly The Shabandar, and other shops. Somewhat of a local celebrity. Irfan Abraham, the poet from Fallujah. She remembered him because he was another educated person to leave her hometown, someone looking for more, someone who knew they had something to say. That's the way she couldn't help but read his work. And it was Irfan Abraham, the Christian Arab, that she could find, before the invasion and when it was safe for Christians in Iraq, reading aloud with Sunni and Shite poets in the same room, sharing ideas and signing each other's books.

Nisreen was always intimidated to speak to him, feeling outside the scene. Now it was too late. She said his name. Irfan Abraham. And the names of the others who had died. When she reached the end of Al Mutanabbi Street and passed her collapsed bookstore, she turned and repeated the *Sorat Al fatiha*, praying, not paying attention to what direction she faced.

Boys ran by. Wood boards for toys.

Smoke coughed out an open window. Fires free to burn themselves out.

Though only her ringer was on, Nisreen thought she felt her cell phone buzz in her pocket. She fished it out. It was only her imagination.

*My husband. Ahmed. Dear Ahmed.*