

Chapter 9

Sydney, Australia

Taresai

Cairo seems like a lifetime ago.

The life I lived just last week seems worlds away. Four full days we have spent in this new country. The first four days of the rest of our lives.

We arrived at our new home in a quiet street in a suburb called Silverwater, NSW. 23 Edgar street, a three-bedroom Victorian cottage, like the kind I'd see in those old American movies, surrounded by the most greenery I've seen with my own adult eyes.

The house has a front yard with a garden full of flowers, weathered stone fountains, and a gravel driveway that leads into the backyard where Santino can teach the kids to ride bikes.

We arrived in the early afternoon, our brains obtuse from jetlag, and our bodies confused by the strange phenomenon of being plucked from one side of the planet and thrown into another. Santino and the kids rushed inside and collapsed onto their beds the first chance they got.

I stood at the threshold of the door for a long while.

All of a sudden, the reality of it all, washed over me. Our own home and everything we've ever needed firmly in our grasp and standing close enough to reach for more.

I walked out into the garden, took off my sandals, and sunk my feet into a damp patch of grass. Planting my roots, savouring each second that passed of being this close to the earth. My heart wept tears of joy. The peace that I've spent all my life searching for, the peace my ancestors could only dream of and only feel in death; I have finally found.

When we landed at Sydney international airport, we were welcomed to the country by a young, blue-eyed man named Nathan, and a young woman called Kathleen, who I was surprised to learn, is Filipino.

Nathan and Kathleen had correspondence with Santino, they're workers for an organisation who help newcomers adjust to their new lives in this country.

They gifted us with a week's supply of food and necessities, and a drive to our new home, fully furnished, showering us with donated items; clothes, books, VHS tapes, toys, and appliances.

The first couple of days, Nathan and Kathleen drove us around the neighbourhood, showed us where the local food markets were, enrolled Santo and Akita at the local primary school, Amara at day-care, and registered Ashanti at the children's hospital nearby.

One particular afternoon ended with Nathan and Kathleen suggesting that I attend the local English classes held for new arrivals. Though my first instinct was to decline, that night, I was left with pamphlets for those programs, written in words I cannot read.

I watch Akita, squealing when a ladybug lands on her finger.

She's playing in the garden with feet bare, braided hair, in her yellow dress – which from here, already seems to have grass stains at the hem.

Santo searches in the shrubs for lizards and “crocodiles” apparently. Santino is inside with Amara who's probably playing with her new toys and Ashanti, fast asleep. It's a little after supper, the afternoon sun has started to dip. We had chicken, bean stew, and rice, made from my very Australian pantry.

‘Okay kids, five more minutes!’

‘Ten!’ Santo demands.

‘No, the mosquitoes are going to bite your little legs off. Five minutes. Are you listening, Akita?’

‘Yes, Mama,’ she giggles, twirling in the afternoon sunlight, dancing with the flowers and flying insects; a little black girl, in an ocean of colours, dressed in her yellow dress.

That night, after all the kids are bathed and ready for this day to end and tomorrow to begin, I hear Akita call for me from her bedroom.

‘Mama?’ she beckons softly, over Amara's gentle snores.

‘Yes, honey? Can't sleep?’

She hesitates under her blankets, pulled right under her chin. She stares up at me, wordlessly pleading for something she cannot voice. I just have to kneel in the space between hers and Amara's bed, stare back at her patiently, waiting for her words to come out.

‘What is it?’ I nudge.

‘Can you, can you please, read this story for me?’ she asks, pulling out a book from under her blankets. On the cover of the book is an illustration of a fish with rainbow foiled scales that shift colour in the dim light of the room.

‘Please?’ she whispers, staring up at me with her bulbous eyes.

‘Akita, honey, you know I can’t read,’ I say, my heart breaking a little.

‘Do you want me to get your father?’

‘No, Mama,’ she shakes her head, ‘you don’t have to read the words.’

Akita opens the book enthusiastically and points to the rainbow fish on the page, ‘just look at the pictures on every page and make up the story as you go.’

She holds the book up to me with her tiny hands, her small, tender fingers.

Akita looks at me with the whole world in her eyes.

I see so much in my daughter, feel so much.

Her face explodes with light when I take the book from her hands. I open it to the first page and begin telling a story in a way that it was not written.

Chapter 10

Sydney, Australia

Akita

Today I learned to spell and write my full name in English.

Akita Amal Santino Adolé.

I learned so many other things too in the time we've lived in number 23 Edgar Street, Silverwater. I've learned that there are twenty-six letters in the English alphabet, though counting to one-hundred came to me a lot easier.

I find spelling and writing in English more difficult than speaking, which, I, Akita – seven-years-old – am most certain in my fluency.

Though I suppose, I cannot be absolute until I'm speaking a sentence and I realise I don't know the next couple of words that come after. That, to be honest, hasn't happened in a while.

I'm now in second grade at St John's Primary, a school in the next suburb over.

On our first day, Santo and I walked through the gates, without a single English word familiar to our tongues other than "hello," "goodbye" and that one swear word that Santo taught me.

I couldn't understand what anybody was saying for the first couple of hours, floating from place to place until I was led and introduced to everyone in my class. That's where I made my first friend. Her name is Awien and she looks every bit like me, her skin is as dark as mine, her hair braided too. The sun shone wherever Awien stood because she speaks both languages.

She spoke Arabic to me and translated my words into English for my classmates and my teachers. It was Awien who told the teachers that my name was pronounced "*Ah-kee-ra,*" not "*Aki-ta*" and Santo is "*Sun-toe,*" not "*San-no.*"

Everybody in first grade wanted to be my friend, they didn't care that I looked nothing like them, spoke nothing like them, I didn't even eat the same food they did.

In second grade, after a year of being at this school, my closest are Awien, my friend named Ashra – which means the number ten in Arabic, and Eliza. Ashra's family is from a country called Nepal, a place of high mountains and white snow.

Eliza has hair the color of fire and eyes the colour of tree leaves in the autumn when they start to lose their vibrance.

My teacher's name is Miss Hart – which is said like the word “heart,” as in the thing that beats in your chest, even though it isn't spelt the same way, nor does it mean the same thing; but I can't help but see that when I see her.

Miss Hart is wonderful. Her unruly blonde hair falls down to her waist, some parts of it curl, other parts don't. We end each day with a song, Miss Hart takes out her guitar and plays it for us, singing us songs with her melodic voice.

There are so many things I love about Miss Hart, but what I adore most is that she never treats me better or worse than the other kids. I know she enjoys teaching us, if she were given an option to do any other job in the world, she'd still choose this, she'd still choose us.

I really like St John's Primary, I like going to school, learning about the world, and how to do things. A couple times a year, we go on excursions outside the school. This term we've been to the aquarium and the museum in the city, where we looked at artifacts from the olden days.

The weather in Australia is very odd.

There's summer, which is their normal season, it's warm, as the world should be with a giant flaming ball of fire above us. Then there's autumn, when all the leaves die, followed by winter, which is the wildest thing I have ever experienced. The sun disappears for weeks at a time, it rains all hours of the day, and the air just about turns to ice. Last winter, our first winter, we all got really sick, Santo was afraid his ears would fall off. Though he'd never admit it, there were times I caught him going to bed with Ashanti's socks over his ears.

There are a lot of white people here, with their cool coloured eyes and hair in a rainbow of light and dark hues. I expected that, but I was amazed to discover so much more here.

The people I'd see on the street, the kids that go to this school, they're from all parts of the world. In my class alone, there's a girl from India called Melinsa, a lot of kids from Lebanon and a place called Vietnam, and a boy who looks like me, but different. His name is Michael, from Nigeria.

I was entranced and drunk with fascination upon my discovery of all the other colours of this land, the cultures. It gave me a feeling I couldn't place, but it felt like home.

I saw Mama in the way Melinsa's mother carried her young daughter, the way her hips swing when she walks, and the way she smells like perfumes and mixed spices.

I saw Baba in the way Ali's mother scorns her son, I see Santo in the way Michael tries to beat me in everything, from sports to spelling. I see myself in Eliza, in the hopes, the dreams, and the wishes we share.

‘Come on Akita, please?’ Eliza pleads, sitting legs crossed on the asphalt. It’s the second half of lunchtime, Awien, Eliza, Ashra, and I are playing hopscotch by the pond.

‘Eliza, why don’t you tell Nena to bug off yourself?’ says Ashra.

‘Because she only listens when Akita tells her off!’ Eliza lies.

‘No, she doesn’t,’ Awien butts in, throwing a stone on the farthest square, ‘she just picks on you when no one else is around.’

Ashra laughs, ‘why do you care what Nena says anyway? She’s mean and stupid.’

Eliza folds her arms over her chest and looks away. Her face reddens and her eyes swell like they always do when she’s about to cry.

‘Okay, okay,’ I say, picking up a stone and throwing it on the seventh square, ‘I’ll tell her off.’

I hop to the seventh square, bending my knee to pick up the stone with one leg in the air.

‘Hey,’ Awien says, looking past my shoulder as I hop toward her, ‘aren’t those your parents?’

I turn to where Awien points with her eyes; the large, red-brick building where the library and the principal’s office reside. I squint and stare.

‘Yep,’ I breathe, gazing at the two familiar figures walking up the steps and disappearing behind the large wooden doors.

Santo must be in trouble again.

Taresai

I sit in Principal McDonald’s office for the third time in six weeks.

I like the Principal; she has my respect.

Principal McDonald is very fond of Akita, she told us the very first day we met her that our little girl has “exceedingly high potential.” I never asked how she came to think that, but she’s the principal, she probably says that about most kids. She greeted Santo with the same kindness but offered no words about his dispositions or his qualities.

We sit in her office, opposite a large window that oversees the playground. Principal McDonald’s office is decorated with framed certificates and photos of her with students, some looking decades old.

Her shelves are lined with leather-bound books and countless awards made of glass and synthetic gold.

She wears tortoise-shell reading glasses that make her old blue eyes comically large. Soft lines appear around the features of her thin face. Lines of age, of smiling too hard, speaking too

much. Her hands are wrinkled but smooth, like the only struggle they know is writing with an uncomfortable pen.

I listen to her speak to Santino and I, only understanding every couple of words. Though it's only Santino who responds to her concerns, the Principal includes me in these discussions, which is much more than I can say for anyone else; doctor's visits, shopping malls, the bank. I may not fluently understand the language of this land, but I always grasp the essence of things, not by what's spoken, too often I find there's more to be found in the unsaid.

I understand it by reading the deep lines between Principal McDonald's eyes which grow deeper when she says certain words, in it, I see her sorrow and feelings of conflict. In the tightness of her lips, I read her frustration, and in her eyes, I see her discipline and decisiveness.

That's how it's been for the past fifteen months. Reading people, instead of listening or speaking to them.

Santo's done something, not as bad as the first time we were in this office but not as benign as the last. Principal McDonald has made her decision for the consequences Santo will face for his actions but she is opening up to us for suggestions as to how Santo's future at this school; the future of his education can be bettered by us.

Santino turns to me when Principal McDonald finishes speaking.

He takes a deep breath.

'Santo was being disruptive in class. He coloured the entire whiteboard in black permanent marker during recess and pressured a boy into gluing his hand to the desk.'

Oh my.

I tell myself not to be surprised with what Santo is capable of, but every time, he reaches new heights of anarchy.

'The principal is suspending him for the rest of the week, but she wants us to alter the way we parent Santo so that behaviour like this doesn't happen in the future. If Santo doesn't change his ways, she'll have no other option than to expel him.'

I look to Santino, then to Principal McDonald, and nod solemnly.

'I'm sorry,' she says, her hands clasped on her polished oak desk, uttering the first words I understand.

We walk out of the office and into the hallway where Santo sits on a chair, his blue school shirt covered in black and blue marker, navy-blue school shorts stained with remnants of dried glue.

‘Hey, Mama. Hi Baba, fancy seeing you here,’ he smiles nonchalantly.

‘Not another word, Santo,’ I say through clenched teeth.

‘Up. Now. We’re taking you home.’

Santino catches the next train into the city back to work and I walk Santo back home. It’s a Wednesday, the only day of the week Ashanti is in day-care, if I’m grateful for anything today, it’s that. We walk silently through the streets of Auburn, my sandals shuffling on the pavement. Santo asks if we can dine in at one of the café’s we pass, I tell him there’s food at home.

I soak Santo’s uniform in the laundry sink while he cleans himself up in the bathroom next door. No tv and no riding his bike until after supper. He is to sit in his room and think about what he has done.

Santo isn’t a bad kid; I know he isn’t, but I don’t understand why he’s losing more control of his impulses as the years go by. He’ll be ten in five months, I expected him to have grown out of his troublemaking phase by now. This environment has been more nurturing to him than the rough streets of Giza. Maybe, he’s having troubling adjusting and this is his only way of expressing it.

The children have adapted with ease and grace into this new life. Santo has a bike that he enjoys riding through the neighbourhood, peddling back home before sundown.

Akita loves it here; she’s made so many new friends at school. Seeing this new world and feeling a part of it has aided her in coming out of her cocoon, bursting with so much personality. She doesn’t often speak, but when she does, words pour out of her, it’s hard to get her to stop.

Everyone in the house that can speak, is fluent in English, myself excluded.

Santo and Akita speak the language to each other and to their father, Amara, and Ashanti; only speaking Arabic with me.

It worries me sometimes, that as they grow, they’ll forget their other language and the bridge of communication between us will collapse into itself if I don’t learn to speak in the language which they speak.

What of Ashanti? She speaks more English words than she does Arabic. Will she have to speak to me through her father? Will all my children have to speak to me through their father? I

shiver at the thought and push it to the back of my mind. I make a silent promise to myself to take up those English classes as soon as Ashanti is in day-care for at least three days a week. We've been in Australia for a full year and three months. My children have turned another year older, celebrated Christmas for the first time since leaving Sudan, Easter last April, and a blessed year of milestones.

When the sun is out, and kids are at school and Santino at work, I spend some of my time wandering through the neighbourhood. I know the area of Silverwater and the surrounding suburbs like the palms of my hand. I know where all the shops are, I know which buses to catch to get to the city, to the hospital, dentist, I know how to get to the train station, the library, the park. So, when the kids or Santino say they want to go somewhere, I know where they're going to be and how they're going to get home.

I've met three Sudanese families in the area and become great friends with all of them, but mostly with a lady called Achol, whose daughter Awien is in the same class as my Akita. Achol is a good woman, she reminds me of home, of Sudan. On days I feel the ache of loneliness, when the weight of foreignness becomes too heavy to bear, I connect with Achol. She reminds me of all I've lost; all I've sacrificed.

I lost contact with my mother, my sisters, my best friend Manuela, and all my friends back in Egypt, who now seem worlds away, drifting further apart as the days pass. We've tried on many occasions to reach out to them. Santino wrote a letter, seven months ago and sent it to our old address in Giza. I hoped for a few weeks, checked the letterbox daily, but we received nothing in return.

Despite this being the happiest I've ever been, there is a gaping hole inside me I can't deny, missing all the things I didn't know I would miss about my old life.

Akita

I walk home accompanied by the spring sun and my own thoughts. Without Santo over my shoulder, I look forward to times like this, at the end of the school day when I can skip home in the warm sunlight and take in my quiet neighbourhood.

The magpies call in their fluty song from the tops of the trees and powerlines. I hear the bees buzz wildly when I pass Mr and Mrs Oliver's rose garden. I feel the gumnuts stuck in the grooves of my shoes rattling as I try to skip from one square of the pavement to the next, basking in the symphony of my neighbourhood.

I stop and stare up at a tree that stands at the end of my street. I reach up high and brush the red bristles with my fingertips, the low hanging leaves licking my forehead. I've gotten taller over the winter. I lost most of my baby teeth, too. Where two small teeth in the front of my gums, slightly separated, used to be, two large teeth have taken their place. I'm still getting used to my new front teeth which never seem to stop growing, although, I'd rather have big teeth than no teeth at all.

Santo calls me "Bugs Bunny" and it annoys me to no end.

Amara turned four last month, she's okay sometimes, but mostly it seems like she exists to annoy me. She can speak now, so naturally, she doesn't ever shut-up. She takes all my things, wants whatever I have, and takes up all the space in our room. There are times though, in the silent nights when I just watch Amara sleep peacefully; so, so quietly. It's in those moments that I feel I'm able to love her loudly.

I skip down the street until I reach the gates of number 23 Edgar Street. The white house nestled behind all the trees on the end of the street, my castle in this magical kingdom. I walk through our front garden, between the cracked stone fountains, and climb the wooden steps up the veranda.

I smell Mama's cooking when I dump my shoes and school bag by the front door and race into the living room. Santo's lying on the couch with his head to the carpet and his feet in the air, grinning when he sees me enter.

'Hi Akita, honey,' Mama says, popping her head out from the kitchen.

'Hi Mama,' I say walking toward her.

'Food will be ready soon.'

'Mm-hm.'

'If you're hungry, there's alzabadiu in the fridge.'

'I'm okay.'

I walk to the lounge, my socks slipping on the tile floors.

'You got in trouble today, didn't you?' I ask, sitting legs crossed on the carpet next to Santo.

'Yep.'

'What did you do?'

'I glued Elias' hand to the desk.'

'Why'd you do that for?'

'It doesn't matter. Mrs Declan is foul for getting me in trouble. She's so sensitive. I wasn't even that bad today, she's just weak.'

I don't agree with anything Santo's saying, from all my encounters with Mrs Declan, I've gathered that she's a very lovely woman. She's small and round and laughs at a lot of things. Maybe she is sensitive, but that's not a bad thing, though, it only makes dealing with Santo that much harder.

I just wish Santo would be good at school, I really like it there and I don't want him to spoil the teacher's impressions of me because he's my older brother.

'Hey?' Santo says suddenly, 'can you do me a favour?'

'It depends what it is.'

'Can you get the tv remote from Ma?'

I look at Santo, then toward the kitchen.

'Only if you stop practicing those wrestling moves on me,' I say.

'Deal.'

I get up and walk into the kitchen again.

'Hey, Mama, can I please get the tv remote?' I ask in the sweetest voice I can. She finishes chopping an onion, rinses her hands, reaches above the fridge, and hands me the remote.

'Make sure you're out of your school uniform before you sit back down.'

I hand Santo the remote and go to change my school uniform. I come back to the lounge with Santo on the carpet flicking through the channels, his face droopy with boredom. He blows a raspberry.

'Nothing's on.'

A silence falls between us, filled only with the buzzing of our minds as we try to think of something to do before supper. Then my mind hatches an idea that zaps through me like lightning.

'Wanna sneak into Ms Nora's backyard?' I grin.

Ms Nora is the lovely lady next door who's always giving Mama lemons and pears and peaches from her trees. She has a large backyard with a seesaw, a swing-set, and a trampoline. She lets us jump over the fence and play in her backyard all the time, but her pink-faced, pudgy grandkids, a boy and a girl, always kick us out in a not-so-polite way – by throwing lemons at us.

I only jump into Ms Nora's backyard when her grandkids aren't there, but that seems to be the only time Santo wants to go.

He beams at me with mischievous delight, 'you're on Bugs Bunny.'

