

MY
STORY

**NOOR-UN-NISSA
INAYAT KHAN
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 SCHOLASTIC

**For Rehan,
who loves tales of heroes.**

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Chapter 1

Abba

February 1927

It is February and the air is chilly with the season. The promise of warmth that comes with spring is still weeks away in our home city of Paris. On some mornings the ground is slippery with ice. As the eldest of the Khan children, aged thirteen, I am the one tasked with scraping it off our drive. We regularly have visitors and Amma doesn't want them to slip and fall on their way to the front door.

It is on one of these icy mornings that the sky caves in on my world.

I am bent over with a shovel, my favourite red scarf wrapped tightly around my nose and mouth, and my woolly hat pulled over my brows to keep my head and ears as warm as possible. With a deep breath I raise the shovel high above my head and bring it down hard on the ice. My hat slips over

my eyes and I push it back impatiently to get a better view of the newly formed patterns. The thin cracks make interesting designs and I start to see stories in the shapes – is that a horse rearing up on its hind legs? A wolf pack running across the hills? Making up stories is my favourite thing to do, and my little brothers and sister are always desperate for me to tell them new and exciting tales. Abba says that one day, I might even be able to write books and make a living from my imagination. I hope he's right. It is my dream to become a children's writer when I grow up.

My latest story is about a girl who escapes the woods after becoming lost in them. Although initially scared, she finds the courage to face the darkness and danger and manages to find her way out. The moral of the story is that only the brave can find the light.

I'm very proud of it and I can't wait to read it to Abba. Of course, I'll have to wait until he returns home. Five months ago, he left to travel to his homeland, India, and he still hasn't returned. Amma, my siblings and I miss him so much and we're all hoping that he will come home soon. There is always more laughter, joy and stories to be shared when he is around.

“Hello, Miss Noor.”

The voice startles me and I stumble back a few steps

before realizing it is only the postman. His black moustache is flecked with frost and his teeth chatter together.

He thrusts his arm forward and hands over an envelope. I glance down at it. Perhaps it is from Abba on his travels!

“Thank you, I’ll take it to Amma now. Would you like to come in for a hot cup of cocoa?”

My offer brings a small smile to his face but he shakes his head, patting the sack over his shoulder. “Thank you, little one, but I have all this post to deliver.”

He turns to walk away and I watch his feet. If he slips on the path, then I will know that I’ve missed a spot. To my relief, he disappears from view without stumbling. Satisfied, I turn my attention back to the ground. I need to finish scraping this last patch before I go indoors. A few minutes later, with the ice cleared, I turn to climb the steps to the big house at the top.

“Welcome to Fazal Manzil,” Abba always tells visitors, with a big warm smile and open arms. “I have named our humble abode the ‘House of Blessing’ and you are all most welcome.”

We came to Fazal Manzil five years ago. My father is the leader of a spiritual group and we moved around a lot so that he could share his teachings. I was born in Moscow, then we lived in London for several years before finally settling

in Paris. But I know my father still has a special place in his heart for India. As a direct descendent of a king, a sultan whose family was exiled many years ago, Abba is loved by many people there despite the country being ruled by the British Empire.

Looking at Abba, no one would ever imagine him to be a royal prince. In my stories, princes wear bright, colourful clothes made out of silks and turbans decorated with jewels. They hunt tigers and lions whilst riding grand, majestic elephants. Not my abba. He dresses in simple robes and likes to write poems and listen to music. He is a peaceful man who believes in always telling the truth. He also calls himself a pacifist, which he taught me is someone who is against all violence and war. Abba is a big admirer of another famous pacifist, Mr Gandhi, who wants to free India from the British Empire.

Abba has many followers here in Europe, which is why our house is always open to visitors, and why I must scrape away the ice.

Halfway up the steps, my foot slips a little. Gosh! I must have missed a bit. I get to work again and soon the stone step is ice free. I straighten up and gaze out at the view. From where I stand, I can see the city of Paris spread out below. It is a beautiful view and I find myself looking forward to

the summer, when I can spend my time reading books or dreaming up stories on these steps – losing myself in another world – without worrying about freezing to death.

The hallway of Fazal Manzil is warm and inviting from the logs burning in the fireplace. I shrug off my boots, coat, hat and scarf to go in search of Amma. I don't get very far as my feet trip over an object which nearly sends me flying head first. Luckily, I manage to catch myself just in time.

I pick up the long wooden string instrument, my *veena*, which I'd left in the hallway earlier. It is one of my most favourite things, a gift from Abba. I smile as I think about the new tune I've been practising, so that I can surprise him with it as a welcome home gift.

“Bravo, *Babuli*,” he will say, applauding. “*Babuli*” is his pet name for me which means “Father's daughter”. He very rarely calls me by my given name, Noor-un-Nissa.

I find Amma in her room at the top of the house. As I walk in, the small speck of the Eiffel Tower is clearly visible through the large bay window. Amma is sitting in an upright position on her red velvet chair, eyes closed in meditation. As there are no men in the house right now, she is not wearing her headscarf. Her light hair, so different from my own dark strands, cascades over her shoulders. I glance at the framed portrait on her nightstand and

see a younger Amma with her arms around her parents. Back then, she was called Ora Ray Baker but then she met Abba and they fell in love.

Sometimes, I stare at the photo of my American grandparents, wondering what they are like and whether they are as jolly as they look in the photo. I can only wonder, as Amma chooses not to talk about them. They weren't very happy about her marrying outside their race and religion, and even went so far as to disown her. That's why my siblings and I have never met them.

I do wonder sometimes if they ever think about me and their other grandchildren. Even if they did, they've never once invited Amma back to their home in America, or written to be invited to France. Amma never looks sad about her parents though. She is always happy and laughing when Abba is around.

I know Amma has been missing Abba terribly these last few weeks and she has been meditating for longer and longer each day as a way of coping. I don't normally like to disturb Amma during her meditation – she looks so peaceful – but if the telegram is from Abba, she'll want to read it straight away.

“Amma,” I say as softly as I can to ease her out of the meditative state.

Her lips curve into a smile as her eyes open, full of

warmth as always. “My darling, Noor, have you been outside in the cold long?”

“Not too long, Amma, I promise.”

She takes the envelope and places it at her side without a glance, before taking my cold hands between hers to rub them warm. “You’re such a good girl.”

I nod at the envelope. “The postman delivered that letter while I was scraping the ice.” I perch down on the armrest, my hands still clasped in hers. “It might be from Abba to tell us when he’s coming home.”

Amma releases my hands. “It’s not from your abba,” she says softly. “The handwriting is not his.”

Trust Amma to recognize the writing without barely a glance! Disappointed that the letter isn’t from Abba, I get to my feet as Amma’s fingers fumble with the seal. I’m nearly out of the door when an anguished wail sends me running back into the room.

“Amma,” I cry in alarm. “What is it?”

The letter falls to the floor as she crumbles into a ball. Frozen to the spot in horror, I glance from the discarded letter to Amma as she continues to howl.

Her cries are loud and mournful. Her face is buried in her hands and her body heaves with sobs. Bending down, I retrieve the paper to stare at the neat arrangement of words.

One sentence jumps out at me and my heart begins to thud.

*... REGRET TO INFORM THAT HAZRAT INAYAT KHAN
DIED ON 5th FEBRUARY ...*

For a second the words blur and I have to blink a few times before I can re-read them. Even then, I can't believe it. The telegram claims that Inayat Khan has died. That is my abba. Abba cannot be dead! I drop to the floor, wrapping myself around Amma's shaking body, her cries vibrate through me and my own tears gather in my eyes as I try to make sense of what has happened. My wonderful, kind, peace-loving abba has died ... away from us – his family – who loved him the most. How could this have happened?

Our wailing brings the rest of the family to the room. My younger brothers, Hidayat and Vilayat, hesitate in the doorway looking scared. They look to me for an explanation.

"We've had some terrible news," I manage with a slight tremble in my voice.

My brothers continue to stare in their confusion. I take a deep breath and sit up straight. I know I must say the words out loud, but I am afraid of doing so. How can I utter the most awful news in the world?

"Noor?" Hidayat prompts.

I take another deep breath and then release the words.
“Abba has died.”

Their reaction is immediate and the tears flow. I remain on the bed as Amma and my brothers tightly embrace. My younger sister, Khair, pokes her head around the door.

“Why is everyone crying?” Big, frightened eyes gawk at the strange scene. Seeing my little sister looking so scared forces me to bury my own feelings of loss deep inside me. It dawns on me that as Abba is no longer with us, it falls on me to look after my family. Abba would want that from me as his eldest child.

Determined to do the right thing, I brush the tears off my face and sprint over to Khair, gathering her up in my arms.

“It’s all right,” I answer, hugging her tight. “Everything will be all right. I’m here to look after you.”

I know I have to be strong for all of us, even though I want nothing more than to crumple into a heap like Amma.