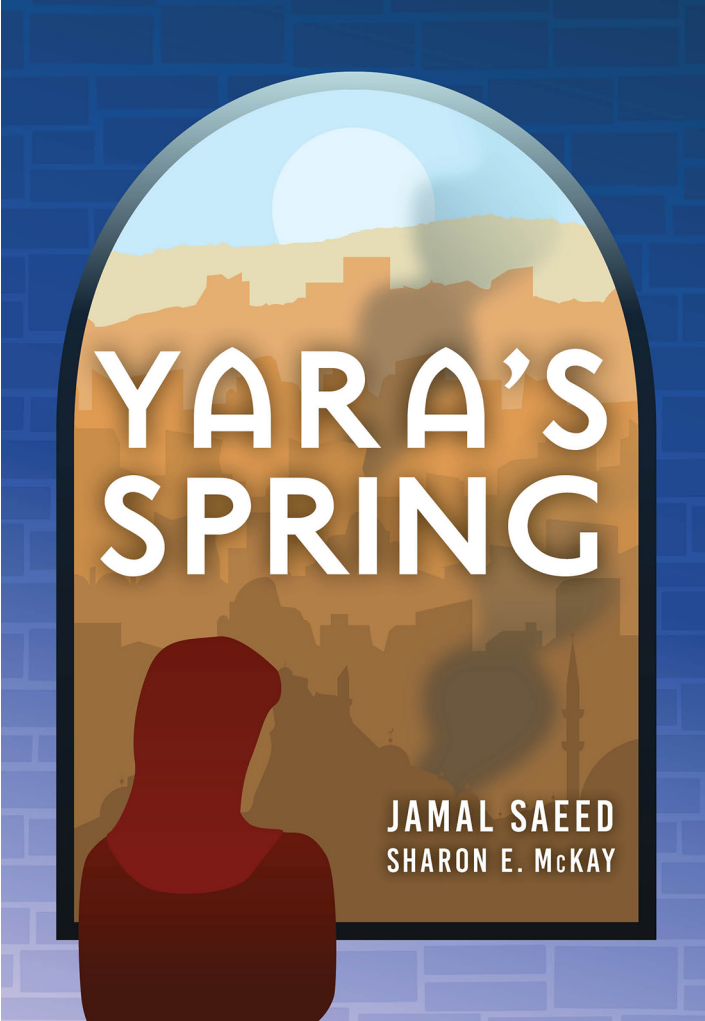




YARA'S SPRING

JAMAL SAEED
SHARON E. MCKAY

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JAMAL SAEED
&
SHARON E. McKAY



annick press
toronto + berkeley

To my sons, Ghamr and Taim, and their peers. —J.S.

To my sons, Sam and Joe. —S.E.M.



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There is hope after despair and
many suns after darkness.

—Rumi

General map of Syria and surrounding countries
[to come]

THE END

AZRAQ REFUGEE CAMP, JORDAN

2016

The morning sun was a thin, orange strip on the horizon. Spinning golden sand blurred the rows and rows of the camp's rectangular tin shelters. Around Yara, women charged the wind, their eyes blinking under sand-encrusted scarves, their long black gowns slapping against their ankles like the beating wings of crows.

She felt the scribbled note in the pocket of her jeans. It read:

*Stop by the office tomorrow. Mr. Matthew wants
to see you.*

—Lina

The note had been delivered to her shelter last night. She hadn't slept since. What did he want? Had her application to

go to a foreign country been rejected? Had they discovered that she had lied? That she had killed a man?

“The rules are clear: if a lie is discovered on your immigration application, it will be terminated immediately,” Mr. Matthew had said.

Yara moved through the camp, a long-limbed, sixteen-year-old girl who walked with purpose. From a distance she had the body of a long-distance runner. Up close she looked like a girl who had been half-starved for a long, long time.

It wasn't Yara's beauty that made her unforgettable. Her arched eyebrows and razor-sharp cheekbones were intimidating. Her brown eyes shot through with bolts of gold gave her the look of a tiger. She held her head high on thin shoulders that were as straight as arrows. But the set of her mouth, her clenched jaw, and a chewed lower lip told the real story. She had seen things, done things. She might have looked sixteen but inside she was old. Fifty? A hundred? How, in a war, could it be otherwise?

The office was ahead. It was a long, temporary shelter made of tin. Squinting, she could make out the blue letters “UN” on the office door, and beneath the letters, the name:

MATTHEW MCGONAGALL

Counselor

Yara climbed three shaky wooden steps and knocked. “*Marhaba!*” she called out, offering hello in Arabic. She pressed her ear to the door. “*Marhaba, Lina!*” Lina was Mr.

Matthew's Jordanian assistant. She was kind and soft-spoken, with dark eyes rimmed in charcoal-black. She was not much older than Yara, maybe eighteen or nineteen?

"Hello? Mr. Matthew, hello!" Yara tried English this time and again hammered the door. Still nothing. But Mr. Matthew often worked in the early morning, before the heat of the day set in. He used to call himself "Matt," but his Jordanian co-workers had laughed. "Matt" in Arabic meant "died."

And his last name was unpronounceable. *Mick-gooo-naa*? No. *Mack-gone-gal*? They had agreed that "Mr. Matthew" would do.

He was from Canada. Or maybe Scotland. But the Scots talked differently, didn't they? He had red hair that lit up his head like he was on fire. His eyes were pale blue, like water. And he was big—not fat, but when he stood up from his desk it seemed as if the tin walls of his office might burst apart.

"Hello?" Yara called out again. Still nothing. "Damn," she mumbled. It was her favorite English word. She gave up and thumped back down the steps. If she returned to her shelter she would be put to work changing, washing, and feeding babies. And she was so tired.

There was only one place she could hide and wait for Mr. Matthew or Lina to open the office.

Head bowed, Yara covered her mouth with the end of her headscarf and trudged on.

The hospital with the new maternity wing was to her right; the community hall was to her left, and there was a basketball court beside it. The main gate was ahead. Even this early there

were boys clustered around the gate like bees. Likely they had not been to bed. This was the place where recruiters for ISIS, Al-Nusra, and other gangs chanted into young boys' ears: *Make your life worthy of Allah and join us in the fight against the infidels.*

The United Nations guards chased the recruiters away, but they came back and back and back—waves of black-toothed, evil men with sneers on their lips and dull, empty eyes.

This was also the place where rich men from other countries came to buy girls. They wanted wives, or so they said. Yara pursed her lips so tight they went white. She knew the English words for it: human trafficking. She knew better words: *tijarato ar-raqeeq*, slave trading.

They were told that they were safe in the camp but only if they were not stupid, another good English word.

A boy spotted her. "Where are you going?" he called out. "Come and talk with us. We can make you rich."

Yara hunched her shoulders and pulled her headscarf down over her forehead. She wished the UN guards would chase the boys away, too. But where would they go? Back to crowded shelters that stank of dirty diapers.

"Hey, *sharmouta!*" The boys came closer.

Yara spun around, fists clenched. There were three of them. How old were they? Ten? Eleven? In the early light she could make out their shapes but not their features. They stood with their feet rooted like trees.

"*Sharmouta! Sharmouta! Sharmouta!*" they chanted. Prostitute? Were they calling her a prostitute? Did they think she would take their dirty talk?

"You are old. You need a husband," one yelled again while the other two laughed. "We can get you a husband," the second boy shouted. Rage surged through her as fast and hot as a bullet. "Fifty American dollars—that is what we can get for you. Maybe a hundred!" All three boys stomped about and cheered.

On the ground in front of her was a round, grey rock. It fit perfectly into the palm of her hand. As her arm crested into an arc above her head, the rock sailed gracefully up into the air and disappeared into the grainy mist. *Thud*. A scream. Her eyebrows arched and her mouth twitched into a smile. She had hit her mark.

"Come and get me, dirty donkeys," she growled through clenched teeth. One boy was making mewling sounds, likely the one that got hit. Good. The others had stopped dead in their tracks.

"YOU ARE DONKEYS!" she yelled. She had called them idiots. They reared back like pack animals.

A man, likely a guard, called out, "What's going on?"

Yara waited. She heard the stupid boys' retreating footsteps. "Cowards," she muttered. "COWARDS!" she shrieked.

The guard called out something else. His voice was only an echo now. He was following the boys.

The tip of her shoe stubbed against another rock. The donkeys might return. She crouched. Her fingers curled around another lucky find. It was a hunk of concrete. It would do.

The wind blew stronger and faster. Nearly blind from the sand, Yara stumbled into the school area that was tucked behind the basketball court. Nine tin shelters used as

classrooms were boxed in a large, square play space. There was a nook, a small opening between two buildings that shielded her from the wind and prying eyes. It was a good place to hide. Privacy was a precious thing in the camp.

Slipping between the buildings, with her back pressed against a wall, Yara slid down until she sat on her heels. Cradling the small chunk of concrete against her chest, she pulled out the tobacco pouch from the pocket of her jeans and sniffed it, getting whiffs of apple spiced tobacco. "Oh, Baba," she whispered. She rested her chin on her knees, hugged her legs, and closed her eyes. She was so tired.

There were five people she truly loved left in the world. Of the five, three were in great danger. As for the others who had died, she knew now that it was possible to love the dead as much as the living.

"Uncle Sami, I remember. I remember. I remember that I am loved," she whispered. Tears caught in her eyelashes. "Remember the good times. Remember how it was. Remember the days before it all changed. Don't cry. Don't cry. It doesn't help. Don't cry."



PART 1
Life in Aleppo

CHAPTER 1

ALEPPO, SYRIA

March 11, 2011

Yara slept in. She wouldn't have if she'd had her own phone. Cellphones came with alarms. But Mama said that a ten-year-old girl did not need a cellphone. Wait, wait, wait. She forgot. It was Friday. No school today!

Kicking off the sheets, Yara leapt out of bed and stood on her tiptoes. Friday was *Samah* dance class at the cultural center. Nana would take her. Arms up, she pinched pretend veils in her fingers. "Twirl. Lower arms. Softly! Softly, girls! Raise arms. Twirl," Yara said, in her dance teacher's crisp voice. "Pay attention, girls," the teacher would repeat. "Twirl."

And then she had a brilliant idea! Mama would make her those balloon pants, like a genie in a bottle. "Lift arms. Twirl again, girls, and again, and again." Yara loved dance class. She loved swimming more but it was March, and the pool didn't open until May. Women and girls swam on Fridays

from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Mama had promised her a new swimsuit, a two-piece with a little skirt. "Twirl. Twirl."

"Yara, come and eat," Nana called up the stairs.

No genie pants today! She pulled a dress over her leggings and padded down the stairs to the kitchen, skipping over the last two steps, the ones that squeaked like a trapped mouse. The diesel generator hummed in the distance. Mama and Baba were already at work in the bakery. The smell of baked almonds and buttery-crisp sugar cookies with nutmeg and cinnamon filled the air! There was a faint, sour smell of diesel oil, too.

"You must get your deliveries done before dance class," said Nana as Yara plopped down at the table. Yara rolled her eyes. Of course. Folding a small piece of bread between her thumb and fingers, Yara scooped up the creamy yogurt and topped her creation with a slice of fried eggplant.

"Will Shireen come with us too?" Yara mumbled.

"Do not talk with your mouth full. I will call her mother," said Nana.

Mama and Shireen's mother were best friends, so even though Shireen was eleven years old, almost twelve, and Yara a pitiful, miserable ten, they played together. Maybe "play" was the wrong word. It wasn't like they played dolls. Mostly they talked, although Yara couldn't say exactly what they talked about.

Yara swallowed. "Can we pick up Kasandra on the way?" Kasandra was her other best friend. It was supposed to be a big secret, but Kasandra's family was planning on moving to Germany or Australia or someplace far, far away. Imagine petting a kangaroo! Could you pet a kangaroo? Would they

bite? She'd seen a cartoon of a kangaroo boxing once. Was that for real or made up?

"Yara! *Yara*." Nana lowered her voice. Other people's voices went up when they were cross. Nana's voice went down. Nana was not a normal grandmother. "Did you hear me?" she asked, hands on hips. Yara shook her head. "I said Kasandra can meet us there. Now, go see your parents." Nana rolled up the sleeves of her deep-purple gown, her *abaya*, and plunged her hands into soapy water.

Nana did not especially like Shireen or her parents, despite the fact that her father was a professor. Roja, Shireen's mother, taught classes at the university too. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with Shireen's parents—Yara thought they were wonderful—it was just that Nana believed one could only trust family. And then it might also have had something to do with the fact that Nana did not like Yara visiting Shireen's house when Shireen's twin brother, Ali, was around. "I don't care how modern our country has become, a girl should not be alone with a boy without a family member present," Nana repeated over and over and over and over until Yara wanted to put her hands over her ears and scream, "STOP!"

Nana was always talking about "family." But they hardly had any family! Baba's brothers and sisters had left Syria years ago, and Mama had only one brother, Uncle Sami.

Yara shoved the last bit of food in her mouth. "Finished," she announced.

"Go." Nana waved Yara away as though she were an irritating fly.

Barefoot and flying, Yara raced down the path that connected the bakery to the house. Purple and red bougainvillea climbed wooden arches and trellises on either side of the path, and small lemon trees in giant pots gave the air a tangy, sweet smell.

It was twelve long, leaping jumps from the house to the bakery. Three, four, five . . . “Ahhh!” she cried, hopping on one foot.

“Yara, YARA!” Mama came running out of the bakery, wisps of flour floating around her like tiny clouds. “What’s happened?”

“I stubbed my toe.” Yara, near tears, glared at the potted lemon tree, half expecting it to apologize.

Nana, standing in the doorway, clucked her tongue against her teeth. “Such noise!”

“Hush now, sweet girl.” Mama wrapped her arms around her daughter.

The pain, at first as sharp as a hammer blow, turned into a pulsing throb. Yara looked over Mama’s shoulder. Nana was gone. She bit down on her lip. She could break a leg and Nana would still tell her not to make a fuss.

Mama rubbed Yara’s sore toe. “Are you all right now?” She planted a kiss on her daughter’s forehead. Yara nodded. Mama was as kind and soft as the dough she turned into bread. Her hair was covered with a ruby-red headscarf, making her coal-black eyes stand out like black pearls. (*Black pearls!* Those were Baba’s words. They made Yara laugh and Mama’s face glow like she was standing in front of a hot oven.) Even wearing baggy pants and a loose tunic tied with a brown leather belt,

her mother was, in Yara's eyes, the most beautiful mother in all of Aleppo.

"Where are my helpers?" Baba hollered from the bakery.

"Coming!" Mama laughed, and Yara managed a weak smile.

Baba, dusted in flour and wearing his black baker's hat, opened the oven and poked at the contents. "What happened out there? It sounded like a tiger attack."

"The pot of a lemon tree assaulted a toe," said Mama.

Baba pulled a tray of cookies out of the oven. The blast of warm air was honeyed and spicy and powerful enough to instantly cure a stubbed toe.

"Ahh, those vicious pots. I will make extra *barazek* cookies today just for my sweet girl," he added.

Yara grinned. Nana said that Baba spoiled her. Baba would reply to his mother-in-law, "Meat spoils, not children!" And Nana would respond with "Phah!" and a dismissive wave of her hand. It was always the same.

"How is your toe now?" Mama whispered as she hugged her daughter.

Yara rocked her head from side to side. It was fine.

"Look at my women," said Baba, who was not actually looking at either Mama or Yara but fiddling with the dials on the new stove. "You are as close . . . as . . . a rind on a lemon." He laughed. It was a game they played.

It was Mama's turn. She said, "We are all as close as . . ." she paused, "the skin on an olive!"

Yara giggled. Now it was her turn. *Think, think.* Yara squeezed her eyes shut. "We are as close . . ." She opened her

eyes and saw a discarded piece of bread. "As close as crust on bread!" she cried, fist in the air. Baba and Mama cheered.

"Time for you to go," said Mama as she stood and adjusted her headscarf.

"What is our rule for today?" asked Baba as he examined the tray of cookies.

"I shall not tell a lie," replied Yara, feeling perfectly brilliant.

"Good," said Baba.

"I hope you obey that rule every day," Mama added dryly.

"My daughter will never lie." Baba's eyes twinkled. "Except," he held up a hand, "to tell your grandmother that her sheets are the whitest sheets in the neighborhood."

"But what if they are not?" Yara grinned.

"You know what I mean." Baba pulled a second tray of cookies from the oven. Yara *did* know exactly what he meant. She reached for a sugar cookie.

"Careful, now, they are hot, and one injury is enough for today. The cookies will be here when you return from your deliveries." Mama spoke while stacking the bread on a length of cotton. "Give extra bread to Mr. Khalid. Your father passed him in the street yesterday and said that he did not look well. And the order for Khalto Beitar has doubled. She has had another baby—her tenth! Here, take cookies for her children." Mama rhymed off three more names before plopping the cotton-wrapped bread, and a small stack of warm cookies, in Yara's arms.

Their customers came to the shop, but Mama always made exceptions for regulars who were old or sick. Delivering

