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PARKER BILAL

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Chapter One

Being something of an optimist, it had always struck Makana that it made a good start to the day to wake up in the morning and find himself still afloat. One of the little pleasures of life on an *awama*. He thought of it as a boat, but of course it wasn't, not really, just a flimsy plywood construction nailed haphazardly on to a rusty pontoon. Still, it was a nice thought. A comfort to think that if he wished to he could one day simply cut the moorings and sail off around the world. The truth was that the thing would probably sink like a stone. It was only a raft with walls, to keep the world out. A dream. A trick of the mind. But it is the little things in life that keep us going, as he often told himself.

There aren't too many people capable of sleeping soundly on such an unreliable craft, night after night, not knowing if they will ever live to see another day, or might in fact wake up to find themselves swimming, or even (better or worse?) simply drown in their sleep. But then, Makana wasn't most people. Such worries never bothered him. He had long since come to accept that if it did go down one night there was not really a great deal he could do about it; that it might even be a relief in some way. And besides, he had no real choice in the matter. The risks of

living on an *awama* were a fact of life for a man in his precarious financial situation. And even then, he was already four months in arrears with the rent on his flimsy home and didn't need a soothsayer to tell him there was little prospect of any more money coming into his pocket in the near future. On this particular morning, peace of mind was a luxury he couldn't afford.

Makana was a solitary man. The few friends he had tended to be drawn from among the community of his exiled compatriots: writers, painters, musicians, men and women forced to leave their country or else face the consequences of a repressive regime. Although he saw them infrequently he valued their company and they in turn seemed to appreciate his peripheral presence.

Most days, all Makana had to contend with was the steady stream of traffic that swept without cease along the tarmac artery skirting the west bank of the Nile. He had learned to ignore the fact that if he chose to throw open the grimy shutters, he could look up and see the whirling constellation of flying metal and machinery orbiting his flimsy sanctuary.

The familiar rumble of heavy traffic was already in full swing when he looked down from the upper deck that morning to see his only real neighbours: his landlady Umm Ali and her family. They lived in a shack made of stencilled wooden crates and flattened jerrycans, that clung precariously to the crumbling embankment, rising up like a muddy wave from the water's edge. The long, drooping branches of a huge eucalyptus tree curled down over them like a protective hand.

Makana had not yet unravelled how exactly the *awama* had come into the possession of Umm Ali. There was a long, complicated story involving her late husband, without mention of whom no conversation was ever complete, as well as the village in some obscure part of the *rif* where she hailed from, several

brothers and sisters, a piece of land, and a wayward father who gambled. Makana had long since given up hope of fully understanding the process and as a general rule he steered well clear of the subject. Since it could not be moved and presumably could not be turned to any other kind of profit short of chopping it into firewood, Umm Ali chose to rent the houseboat out. She could have lived on it with her children, of course, but either they needed the money more than Makana did, or they had less faith in its ability to float. Still, so long as she was happy having him as her only tenant, despite the rather irregular manner of his payments, then he had nothing to complain about. There were times when Makana had the impression that they were all clinging to this pile of matchwood as if it actually was a raft adrift far out to sea.

Considering his options for the day, he set about reheating the coffee grounds left in the brass pot on the stove. He gazed out at the river as he waited for the trickle of water from the tap to fill the pot. The tiny cubicle that passed for a kitchen was so narrow that he had to back out of it the same way he went in. If he turned around too quickly his coffee would go flying out of the low window to the fish. The facilities were basic: one small gas cylinder and a rusty metal ring. Since gas was a major expense he used it sparingly, although even when lit it generated little more heat than a candle. As he waited for the murky liquid to boil, Makana wondered if it was worth the trouble, putting off the moment when he could allow himself his first cigarette.

When it had bubbled away for a while and showed no signs of growing any more palatable, Makana poured his coffee into a cup and took it back upstairs. The upper deck was one open space with a set of rusty metal stairs leading up to it from below. The rear wall was missing, having fallen off at some point in

history and never been replaced, which meant that he had an unrestricted view of the river beyond where the wall used to be. This was the place he spent most of his time. He usually preferred to sleep up here in the open air, even when it was cold. Old habits die hard and he couldn't stand being cooped up inside. The furniture was an unremarkable collection he had accumulated over the years. A trestle table, covered in thick pools of dried pigment, that had once belonged to a painter. A creaky old wicker armchair which was his favourite place to sit and where he often slept, his feet propped on the small plastic crate that doubled as a low table. Scattered around the deck lay a collection of cardboard boxes filled with case files and unruly heaps of newspaper – his archives. The boxes were weighted down with stones to stop their contents from flying away, but the fluttering of paper in the river breeze sounded like a forest full of dry leaves.

From here he enjoyed a clear view of the city in all its glory. The pyramids were somewhere out there to the south, buried under a pensive cloud of smog more turgid than centuries of tomb dust, and out of which the pale orb of the sun was now struggling to lift itself. If he stepped to the wooden railings and looked up he saw a jumble of high-rise apartment blocks arranged like an ugly row of broken teeth, blotting out that corner of the sky. People looked out of their windows every day and wondered who on earth would ever think of living on that heap of floating driftwood, and he looked up at them and wondered his own thoughts.

Makana still felt like a stranger in this city. The river he gazed down upon provided a tenuous link to Khartoum, far upstream, the place he still thought of as home even though he had fled it some seven years earlier and had no plan to return there any time soon. He had not had any choice in the matter. It was either leave, or die.

For seven years Makana had managed to find enough work to survive on through his few friends and acquaintances – you got nowhere in Cairo without knowing people. Usually his clients thought they could get him to work a little more cheaply and discreetly than a local investigator might. Still, in recent months he had found himself struggling. The work had dried up, no one had any money, and Makana was faced with the fact that if things did not improve soon he would have to think about finding some other kind of gainful employment. His needs were not excessive, his one vice being tobacco; other than that he lived the kind of frugal existence that would have shamed a wandering Sufi.

Ahead of him lay the prospect of trawling once more round his usual contacts in search of an opening of some kind. That and avoiding Umm Ali, whose patience regarding her long-overdue rent was beginning to wear thin.

Somewhere far away, he heard a voice calling him back to the present. Stirring finally, and realising that he was not going to be able to avoid his landlady, Makana tried to think what excuse he might possibly use this time. In all likelihood she had heard every one of his stories before, many of them more than once. With a sigh, he crossed the deck and peered down at the small, happily plump woman wearing faded, raggedy clothes and a grubby scarf tied around her hair. Umm Ali stood barefoot in the muddy field holding an armful of fat aubergines to her ample bosom.

'You have visitors, *ya bash-muhandis*,' she sang out, with all the ceremony of a courtier making an announcement in the palace of Haroun al-Rashid. Makana could tell that she was excited about something. The rather giddy pitch to her voice suggested she could smell money, which was not a bad thing, generally, as it would have to go past him before it got to her. With a wave of gratitude, Makana walked down the stairs to

the lower deck. He stepped through the cabin door to find his living space had shrunk.

Nasser's High Dam at Aswan had marked an end to the annual flooding of the Nile, but some years, when it was particularly dry and the river level dropped, Makana's floor was somewhat less than flat. It meant looking at the world from rather a strange tilt, although he reflected that this was not such a bad thing altogether. Today, however, the floor was affected by a factor it had never encountered before.

The man standing in the middle of the room had clearly been well fed since birth. He had a sizeable girth and a very stout neck, on top of which was a rather small and perfectly spherical head. It looked like a stone about to roll down a very large hill. Underneath all that corpulence, however, Makana suspected there was a good deal of solid muscle. He looked like he could have eaten the boat for breakfast. Also, he was wearing a suit. Not many people stepped on to the *awama* wearing a suit. Makana began to understand the reason for Umm Ali's excitement. It wasn't much of a suit, the kind you might pick off the rack at Omar Effendi's – the state-run department stores. Makana had one himself somewhere. But this man looked uneasy, as if his bulk was about to burst the seams at any moment. His expression said he would have been more at home directing a donkey to and from a muddy field. He was cultivating a rather silly little moustache to lend him an air of sophistication, but the stains on his trousers said he had eaten fava beans with olive oil for breakfast, just like the rest of the country.

'Would you mind standing further over to that side?' Makana asked. 'Only the boat tilts if there is too much weight on the outside.'

The gorilla stared back at him impassively. Either he did not understand or he didn't like being told what to do. The thick brows furrowed angrily and he glared back as though pondering a profound metaphysical dilemma. It was such an alarming expression that Makana burned his finger on the lit match he was holding. The man's fists were balled up tightly – clearly he was the type who resorted to words only when physical violence was ruled out. Before either of them could move or speak, however, another man stepped in over the threshold.

His suit was in an entirely different category and certainly not purchased at Omar Effendi's. A more likely guess might have been one of the fancy boutiques of Paris or London. For the price of that suit Makana could have bought the whole houseboat, sent Umm Ali home to her village a happy woman, and still had enough change to buy himself a whole new wardrobe. The man inside this suit was slim and naturally elegant. Around sixty, Makana guessed, with his hair combed back from his fine, even features in a smooth white wave. He glanced around the place with the curiosity of a man who finds himself inexplicably inside the monkey cage at the zoo. Then he snapped his fingers and the big man turned and left without a word, which was good news for a number of reasons, mostly because the floorboards seemed to heave a sigh of relief. In place of the blank expression of the big man, the new arrival was wearing a thin, unpleasant smile that Makana realised wasn't a smile at all, but a grimace of distaste. Whatever he was smoking actually had tobacco in it by the smell of it. Makana took a step sideways and flicked his valuable second Cleopatra of the day through the low window out of pure shame.

'Why the dramatic entrance?'

'It's his job,' said the slim man, distractedly. 'You are alone, I

take it?' He circled a hand in the air. There was a lot of gold on that hand. Makana had a frying pan hanging in the kitchen about the size of that wristwatch. It answered any nagging queries he still had about the purpose of the gorilla. If you were going to walk around with that much gold on display, you would need a big friend.

'I'm alone. Are you going to explain what this is all about?'

The slim man seemed to be in a hurry to leave, now that he had seen the place.

'I am just the messenger. Mr Hanafi himself will explain.'

Makana kept his mouth shut. He didn't want to look stupid.

'I'll get dressed,' he said.

He went into the bedroom and found his best shirt, picking up the jacket that hung from a nail on the back of his bedroom door and dusting it down for a moment before giving up with a sigh and pulling it on.

Umm Ali trailed alongside them up the path that led from the *awama* to the road, still clutching her aubergines in her skirts.

'Everything is all right, I hope, *ya bash-muhandis*?'

'Everything is fine, thank you.'

'*Al-hamdoulilah*, thank God.' She was talking to Makana but her eyes never left the other man, whom she clearly suspected of all kinds of deviousness.

'May the Lord preserve you.'

'And may He watch over you and yours, Umm Ali.'

It wasn't hard to spot the visitors' car. When they came up on to the road there was a queue of battered vehicles stacking up, trying to get a good look at it. A steady stream of earthy comments was being flung at it. The big man in the cheap suit climbed impassively behind the wheel. Makana thought it was one of those Mercedes they used to call a 'ghost' because they are so

silent and had no number to identify the model, but his knowledge of cars was probably as outdated as the pyramids. When they got inside the big white car the locks on the doors clicked shut and Makana discovered another possible reason for the nickname. Once inside the dark interior, the air conditioning and the tinted windows cut off the outside world. It was like entering another dimension – a spirit world where nothing could touch you, physically or otherwise. This is how the rich live, he thought as he settled himself into the plush seat. Out of sight of the rest of us.

Chapter Two

As they drove, Makana tried to recall what he knew about the man he was being summoned to meet. The name Saad Hanafi was not unfamiliar to him, just as it was not unfamiliar to anyone in the country who had eyes and ears. Umm Ali would have passed out in a dead faint if she had heard that name uttered on her *awama*. Saad Hanafi was one of the richest men in Egypt. He was also one of the most influential. His interests ranged from substantial stakes in a handful of foreign automobile franchises, to include frozen-food lines, insurance companies, a good deal of real estate . . . and, most important of all, a football team.

In this world, it seemed, if you wanted to assure yourself of a seat in the temple among the great and godly, owning your own football team greatly improved your chances. And whereas most teams were associated with one particular part of the city or another, the Hanafi DreemTeem represented the aspirations of millions. This was what he really offered: a dream that everyone could share. In a draw held once a month, he gave away an apartment to some fortunate person. On television you could watch them screaming and fainting as they were given the news. They wailed and howled and fell to the ground. They tore at

their hair and jumped up and down. People supported Hanafi's team because they wanted something to believe in.

From what they printed in the papers, his own life story was itself something of a fairy tale. It was referred to over and over again, despite the detractors who claimed that, like so many tales swirling through the air like the dust in this country, it was more myth than fact. The papers printed the story because it was a fable people wanted to believe in – needed to even, in these hard times.

According to legend, the man who now dined with kings and presidents, who ate off silver platters, whose water flowed out of gold taps, had started out in life plucking bricks from a hot oven in a small muddy village in the Delta. Children are used for this task because they have small hands and because they are nimble and quick. An older person would get burned. By the age of thirteen he was trawling the streets of Cairo collecting scrap metal. Eventually, through hard work and good fortune, so the story went, he began acquiring apartments, running his own construction company.

There was a darker version of this fairy tale, in which Hanafi figured as a common *bultagi*, a thug, but even this legend had been bent out of shape, smoothed over by countless reiterations. He stole from the rich and gave to the poor, they said. As a teenager he ran a small gang of hoodlums. They robbed merchants and broke into warehouses. If you wanted someone roughed up, or even killed, they would take care of it for a price. Hanafi, they said, was never caught because he kept people loyal to him. He redistributed his ill-gotten wealth among the less well off, and in return the inhabitants of those neighbourhoods saw him as a hero, defending him to the death. Families who could not afford to pay the rent were allowed to stay on and pay when they could. Children never went hungry to bed. If you went to him for a