THE HYSTERICAL GIRLS OF ST. BERNADETTE'S

ALSO BY HANNA ALKAF

The Weight of Our Sky

The Girl and the Ghost

Queen of the Tiles

Hamra and the Jungle of Memories

THE HYSTERICAL GIRLS OF ST. BERNADETTE'S

HANNA ALKAF

SALAAM READS

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For the ones who scream, and the ones who don't; for the ones who bare their teeth and the ones who grit them instead; for the ones who are scared and the ones who are angry and the ones who survive and especially, *especially* for the ones who don't.

For Malik and Maryam.

For you.

This is a story about ghosts and monsters, some of whom hide beneath human faces. It includes discussions and descriptions of sexual assault, trauma, and PTSD. If this is too much for you right now, please set this book down and come back to it when you can. There is no shame in protecting your scars.

And it'll be here waiting for you, when you're ready.

Love,
Hanna

THURSDAY

The Beginning

It is 12:32 p.m., a little more than half an hour before the school day ends, and the classroom is swampier than a sinner's armpit in the depths of hell.

St. Bernadette's, with its grand arched doorways and windows, its gables, its ornate tiles and stone staircases, stands imposingly on a hilltop in the middle of Kuala Lumpur, as it has done for the past one hundred years—all the better to look down on everyone else, so the haters say, and St. Bernadette's has more than its fair share of those. That's just part of what it means to be the best. But even with the massive wooden double doors of each classroom flung wide open, there is simply no breeze to catch. Overhead, the ceiling fan spins in lazy circles, doing little to provide any kind of relief, and one by one, like the flowers for which each of the school's classes is named, the students of 3 Kenanga begin to wilt in the relentless heat. Heads droop closer and closer to desks, eyes glaze over, and though the teacher does her best, coordinate geometry simply has no power over a room full of post-recess fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds as torpid as cobras after a feeding, and who are unwilling—or unable—to pay attention.

It is 12:47 p.m., and Mrs. Lee is trying to explain something about "calculating the perpendicular" when the first scream makes the students all nearly jump out of their sweat-soaked skins.

The scream is not a pretty, perfectly pitched horror-movie scream. It is hoarse and low, and it shakes and skips, as if whatever is causing it is forcibly strangling it out of the screamer, shaking it out of them in fits and starts. And the source of it is a girl sitting in the third row, two desks from the left; a thin, pale girl with a mop of unruly hair that she wears hanging over her face as if she's trying to hide from the world; a girl so new and so quiet that the others sometimes have trouble remembering her name, or that she is there at all.

They will remember her now, though.

"Fatihah!" Mrs. Lee shakes off her surprise and strides over to the girl's desk. This is not a normal Thursday occurrence, but Mrs. Lee has been teaching for more than twelve years now, and the range of "normal" is so wide in a school full of teenage girls that little fazes her at this point. "Fatihah! What is happening? What's wrong? Aiyo, this girl!" She has to shout to make herself heard, because the girl known as Fatihah will not stop screaming. And the other girls, usually so eager for something, anything, to break up the monotony of the school day, begin to grow restless and fearful and uncertain. Because Fatihah's eyes are wide and staring, gazing up toward a specific spot in the corner of the ceiling as if fixed on something only she can see, something she desperately wishes she couldn't.

"Mrs. Lee, what do we do?"

"Should I call someone?"

"Teacher, maybe we can throw some water on her face."

"Teacher, please make her stop!"

The classroom erupts in confused commotion. Girls are covering their ears, girls are trying to offer solutions, girls are trying their best not to panic, girls are panicking without reservation.

Lily, who sits next to Fatihah, grabs Fatihah by the shoulders and shakes her hard so that her head bobs back and forth, back and forth. "Wake up, Fatihah!" she yells. "Stop it!"

"Don't do that!" Mrs. Lee snaps, frantic in her own helplessness, hands flapping uselessly in the air. "You might hurt her!"

Fatihah's eyes roll back so that only the whites show; her hands clench at the edge of her desk, so tight that the knuckles are white and it seems as if she may crush the wood into splinters; her body shudders, and blue-green veins bulge in her pale temples. And the girls of 3 Kenanga have no idea what to do. Some stare, transfixed, unable to tear their eyes away; some cannot bear to look at all, closing their eyes as if they can will the nightmare away; some cry, and some babble, and many just stand, silent and bewildered and helpless.

And then Lavanya, who sits by the wide open doors, pauses, frowns, and yells something over the chaos, something that silences all but Fatihah, who just keeps screaming.

"There's more."

And as 3 Kenanga listens, they begin to hear it: screams piercing the afternoon heat; screams of every pitch and timbre;

screams so raw and so terribly, profoundly afraid that they turn everyone's blood to ice.

It is now 1:05 p.m. The bell rings to signal the end of school, and nobody hears it.

They hear only the screams.

MONDAY
4 DAYS AFTER THE FIRST SCREAMERS

Khadijah

"This is not a good idea."

I pause, a spoonful of Koko Krunch halfway to my mouth. The problem with this as a statement is that my mother thinks many things are Not a Good Idea.

"Well?" she asks. She looks first at me, then at Aishah, then back at me. As if I'll be the one to say something. Mak is an optimist. She'll look at a weather forecast that says 80 percent chance of rain and say, "That means there's still 20 percent chance of sun!" And she'll look at me and believe, really believe, that I'll start talking now. On a random Monday. When I haven't said a word in three months. "What do you think, Khadijah?" she asks me.

Even if I wanted to talk—I don't—Mak has a way of asking me questions that makes me want to extremely not answer them. So I settle for another big bite of chocolate cereal and a shrug.

Mak frowns. She doesn't have her hijab on yet. The morning humidity makes stray strands of her hair zigzag out away from

her head. Mad-scientist hair. "Don't you think it's just too soon? We don't even know yet what caused it. Those poor girls."

Ah. Now I get it. Mak is talking about the screamers.

Everyone is talking about the screamers.

Except me.

I don't want to talk about the screamers. I don't want to listen about the screamers. I don't want anything to do with the screamers. I want to be able to close my eyes and not remember what that day felt like. Not think about the way those screams echoed off the old stone walls of St. Bernadette's. The way it felt to see girls being carried out of their classrooms. Twenty-seven screamers, all crumpled and white like used tissues.

I just want everything to go back to normal. I think the universe owes me normal.

Mak is peering at me over the top of her steaming coffee mug. "Don't you have anything to say, Khadijah?" she asks. Her eyes are so hopeful. She still thinks she can reach through the layers of protection I have built around myself and yank me out.

For a moment I feel a twinge somewhere in my chest. *She's trying so hard, Khad. Maybe you should too. Maybe it's time.*

Then I remember the times I did try. When I did speak. And she didn't listen. And my heart hardens once more.

"So you'd rather we stay at home?" Aishah asks.

I shoot her a look. It's not like my little sister to jump in. That's my job.

Or at least it used to be.

Mak frowns. "To be safe."

"From what?" Aishah says it almost like it's a challenge.

Mak hesitates. "I don't know," she mutters finally, gathering up her things for work. "I don't know from what. That's the problem. How am I supposed to protect you from something I don't know enough ab—" She catches herself. Starts tying up her unruly hair and coughs. "Anyway. At least promise me you'll be vigilant. Watch out for each other. Read ayat Kursi if anything feels . . . off."

"Sure," Aishah mumbles.

I roll my eyes so hard, I think I see the back of my own skull. My mother works at a newspaper. Her job is literally dealing with facts, all day long. And she thinks we need to protect ourselves from what, exactly? Jinn? Ghosts?

"I saw that." Mak reaches out to whack me lightly on the arm. I shrug, because that was the point. I've never been good at hiding what I think. Even without using words. "I'm not saying that's what I believe," Mak continues. "I'm saying it's worth protecting yourself. Just because you don't believe in the unseen doesn't mean they don't believe in you."

"They already had people come in for that, anyway," Aishah says. "You know. To 'cleanse' the school. That's why it was closed on Friday. What?" she says in answer to my raised eyebrow. I have become an expert at saying a lot while saying nothing at all. "I heard about it from Wani. You know her mom's one of the teachers. Wani got all annoyed because she had to go to school over the weekend. This ustaz and, like, two or three assistants went around to every corner of the school and read doas or

something everywhere." She pauses. "And a priest. And a monk, I think."

Oh good, I think. *Cover all the bases. Equal opportunity ghost-busting.*

"Hmm," Mak says. "They did mention something in the parents' WhatsApp group, but I was hazy on the details."

Aishah coughs. "My point is, whether you believe it or you don't believe it, it shouldn't be an issue anymore. Right?"

"Right," Mak says softly, patting Aishah's hand.

There is a rumble and splutter outside, the telltale signs of the ancient orange school bus making its way down the street. Aishah immediately gets up and heads to the sink with her dirty dishes. I follow right behind her.

"Wait." Mak frowns. "Are you su—"

"See you tonight, Mak," Aishah says. She bends low for salam, kissing our mother's hand.

I hoist my backpack on and head for the door. I don't kiss Mak's hands, and she doesn't expect me to. I don't like to touch, and I don't like to be touched, not anymore. I head out the door and don't look back.

I stopped looking back a long time ago.

We don't sit together on the bus. We never do. I hold my breath as I scurry past the driver. Make my way toward the very back left corner. I've been going to St. Bernadette's since I was seven. I know almost every kid on this bus at least by name. But not a single person looks up or says hi as I walk past. Not even Maria,

who used to wipe her boogers on my skirt in standard one, on our very first day of school.

"Morning, stinkface!" Sumi yells, waving at me. She and Flo have used their backpacks to save a seat for me, as usual. Not that they need to. Everyone knows this spot belongs to the three of us.

Aishah sits down somewhere in the middle, with her own friends. She's in form three this year, and I'm in form four. At St. Bernadette's the younger kids—form one and form two, the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds—go to afternoon session. The rest of us, from form three to form five, make up the morning session. Last year I'd be out the door by six forty-five a.m., and when I got home, Aishah would already be in class. We barely saw each other, and it made us sad. Back in the before times—as in Before the Incident—we used to get excited about the idea of being on the same schedule.

But that was back when we were still talking. When *I* was still talking.

"Yo," Sumi says as I approach, moving her backpack from the seat beside her and offering me a fist to bump.

"Morning, loser." Flo blinks at me sleepily, her head leaning against the window. She's never properly awake until at least the middle of second period.

I shrug off my backpack and settle into the spot between them. Immediately I feel myself relax. Sumi's bony butt is on my left, Flo's more padded one on my right. It used to be that whoever came last got the end seat. But ever since It happened,

Sumi and Flo make sure I am always in the middle. They take their bodies, their friendship, their love, and they use it to make me a cocoon. In here I am snug and protected and safe.

I frown as I glance around the bus. There are more empty seats than usual, I'm sure of it. Flo catches me.

"Yeah, I know," she says softly. "Some of them were screamers."

I feel my stomach clench at the mention of screamers.

Sumi yawns, mouth open so wide, I can see all three of her fillings. "And some of them are scared of becoming screamers, I guess," she adds.

"Close your mouth lah when you yawn," Flo says, wrinkling her nose. "You're so gross."

In answer, Sumi leans over me, gapes right in Flo's face, and breathes on her.

Flo gags theatrically. "I'm going to muntah all over this seat."

Sumi shrieks. "Don't you dare!"

I swat Flo away and grin at the sound of her laugh. The thing about being silent is that you hear a lot more than you used to. Some people have such scared, nervous little laughs. Flo's is deep and full. It wells up from somewhere inside her. It rips through the air as if it wants to touch everyone. Flo laughs like she means it.

"Anyway," Flo says, munching on half a karipap. "What do you mean, 'scared of becoming screamers'?"

"My ma said she heard of this happening somewhere else when she was younger," Sumi says. "She said she thinks some-

times it takes a few days for it to stop. So who knows? Maybe this isn't the end of it. Maybe there'll be more."

"This has happened before?" Flo's eyes are wide.

"Ya. She said this kind of thing is nothing new. She was so casual about it too." Sumi shakes her head. "She said she never went through the screaming exactly, but when she was in school, this girl started talking in this deep, hoarse voice. Like she was possessed."

Flo raises one eyebrow. "What does that have to do with the screaming?"

"I know, right?" Sumi shrugs. "I was like, 'Ma, why you so random?' But then she got all mysterious and was like, 'You know ah girl, sometimes old buildings have things living there you cannot see also.'" Sumi pauses to consider this. "Kesimpulannya, my ma is quite weird lah, sometimes."

"Actually, my mama was weird about it too." Flo shakes her head. "I tried talking to her about the screaming, right, and she shut me right down. Said what's done is done, and then took me to church to get a blessing." She makes a face. "I figured she'd be interested lah since she used to go to St. Bernadette's. But no. And since when does my mother not want to *talk*?"

I can feel my face getting warm, my palms getting clammy. I wipe them off on my baju kurung, then wipe them again. I don't know how to stop it.

"Khad?" It's Flo's hand that reaches out to tug my sleeve gently. They're careful, always so careful, not to touch me directly. They know I can't stand the feel of skin. That's when I realize I'm

gripping the hem of my school top tight in both hands. When I let go, it's a labyrinth of wrinkles. "Are you okay?" I can feel the worried glances they're exchanging over my head.

I hate it.

"May I?" Sumi asks, her hand hovering uncertainly, and I nod. She rubs my back in slow, soothing circles. "There's no reason for the screaming to go on," she says quietly. "They said they've taken care of it. I'm sure it'll be fine, okay? Everything's going to be back to normal."

Normal, I think. Sure. Normal. Sumi and Flo keep talking, and I sit back and stare at the empty spaces. I can hear my mother's voice telling me this is not a good idea. And I feel a tightness in my chest, a weight I can't explain, gathering itself in the cavity behind my ribs so that it's hard to breathe.

Rachel

"This is not a good idea."

My mother shakes her head, then quickly pushes back a strand of hair that falls out of place. Mother does not like mess; not in her hair, which she is wearing in her usual bun; not in her home, where everything is spotless and has its place; and especially, especially not in me.

"But, Mother," I begin, then pause. *No, Rachel. Too needy, too much.* "Mother," I try again, ironing out all my emotions so my tone is calm and reasonable. *That's it, Rachel, that's the way.* "It is my last year in school. I think participating would really help with my extracurriculars, right, so that when it's time to apply to university—"

"Your extracurriculars don't need help, Rachel," Mother says, taking her time to sip hot tea from a fine china cup, which is milky white with gold around the rim. Her back is ramrod straight, her silk cheongsam is pristine, her pinky is held up delicately. Mother always says that appearances are everything, even when we're the only ones around to see them. "You play

the violin and the piano. You are part of youth choir. You are a karate black belt. You tutor underprivileged children in your spare time. You are a prefect. You do not need some . . . play." She says it as if it tastes disgusting, as if she wants to spit it out. "Especially with SPM just around the corner."

"SPM is still a couple of months away," I mumble. My mother has been obsessed with making sure I get perfect results in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia since I first started secondary school. She used to cut out newspaper articles of high achievers and their results, and paste them on my wall, for "inspiration."

"You see this one?" she'd say, jabbing at the grainy photo of some kid grinning between his proud parents and teachers. "Thirteen A1s! This one got only eleven A1s, but has an inspirational sob story about their little sister. You have no sob story and no little sister, so you must work extra hard instead."

She stares at me now, her expression cold, stern. "This is the biggest exam of your life," she tells me, as she has done since I was thirteen. "This is the first step to determining your entire future. You cannot risk it all to dress up and play pretend on some stage."

There is a cold feeling in my chest. I do not say what I want to say, which is, *You chose all of those activities, not me.* I do not say, *My whole life has been yours to curate and calculate and cultivate. Just let me have this, just this one thing.* I do not say, *Surely nobody can determine their entire life based on questions you answer at age seventeen.* I have spent my entire life parsing my mother's words, her exact tone of voice, and none of this will

sway her. I know this. But I try again anyway. "But, Mo—"

"No." My mother picks up her newspaper. Her expression is like a closed door. "The answer is no."

I know when a fight is lost. "Okay, Mother," I say quietly, standing up and smoothing the wrinkles from the skirt of my pinafore. "Okay. I'll go to school now."

"Pakcik Zakaria will pick you up after your prefect meeting and drop you off at orchestra rehearsal," she says from behind the paper. "Don't be late."

"Yes, Mother," I say.

"And, Rachel," she says as I'm about to walk out the door.

"Yes, Mother?"

"I want you to forget about the silly nonsense that happened last week."

"Last week?"

"You know." She puts the paper down long enough for me to see her lips all puckered up again, like she's tasting something sour. "Those girls. The . . . screaming. Don't let it distract you from your work. You understand?"

I blink. It didn't even occur to me that I should be thinking about it at all. "Yes, Mother."

We do not kiss each other goodbye. I don't remember the last time we did.

Pakcik Zakaria has just taken the car to be serviced, and the air conditioner is working like it's brand-new; it's freezing, even though he turns up the temperature when I ask him to. I wrap

my legs in the baby-blue blanket I keep in here—I am always cold—and stare out the window as KL goes crawling by. When we get to the bottom of the hill, I lean forward and tap him on the shoulder. "Saya keluar sini sahaja, Pakcik." I do not like being dropped off at the gate; it makes me feel like everyone is looking at me, even though this is St. Bernadette's, and it's not like I'm the only student getting dropped off by a chauffeur. It's the premier all-girls school in Kuala Lumpur, after all. Everyone tries to get their child in here.

I grab my bag and join the crowd of girls walking slowly up to the school's heavy iron gates. There's a moment, as you're making your way up this hill, when you turn a corner and St. Bernadette's suddenly comes into view, in all its 112-year-old glory. It's not a tall building, but there is something about its arched stone windows and doorways and the massive double doors that open up on either side of each of the old classrooms. St. Bernadette's looms. Its center is its tallest point, a three-story building with a pointed gable topped with a cross. From here lower buildings sprawl left and right, as if St. Bernadette's is reaching out its arms to encompass as much as it can: land, trees, girls.

Sometimes it feels like my mother's grip on me is so tight, I cannot even breathe properly. But as soon as I'm back here within St. Bernadette's embrace, walking across the intricately embossed old red tiles, it gets easier to fill my lungs. I am here. I am in a safe space, a space where I belong. Everything will be fine.

I have been going to St. Bernadette's since primary school—a separate, newer building housing several hundred seven- to twelve-year-olds a little ways down the hill. There is a picture of me from the first day of standard one that sits on the piano at home in a golden frame, watching me every time I play. I'm not even seven years old yet in that photo, my hair in two long braids down my back, my face solemn, my bag almost as big as I am. Other children had parents waiting outside the hall or classroom, holding containers of food, ready to eat with them and ask them about their teachers and their friends; I had nobody. I remember Pakcik Zakaria driving us to school, Mother and me sitting in the back seat, me in my blue blanket. Pa was long gone by then, busy building his new family over in Canada. Sometimes I would creep out of bed in the middle of the night just to open my atlas and see where he was, trace an invisible line from Kuala Lumpur to some place called Vancouver. Vancouver had snow. I tried to picture my father in a big padded jacket, playing in the snow with some little girl who was not me.

Mother told me what was expected of me from the very beginning, that this is a good school, and that I was to study hard and listen to my teachers and not be an embarrassment to her and how she had raised me. Nobody explained what an assembly was; I walked along the corridors, admiring the patterns on the red tiles under my feet, ignoring the loud clanging of the bell, until a teacher came and yelled at me for not getting in line. When I asked my mother why she did not come the way the other mothers did, why she had not explained, why I was

never told, she stared at me and just said, "Because you can handle all of this on your own, what. You are not a baby, Rachel."

I may only have been turning seven that year, but I was already learning to understand what my mother was really saying, the true meanings that lurked in the spaces between the words. It was not just about standard one. It was about everything. She wanted me to learn to handle everything on my own, just like she did.

And maybe it worked. Maybe she had a point. I don't know. I was sometimes jealous of the other children, whose parents always looked so happy and excited to see them.

But I was never afraid like they were, not of the teachers and not of St. Bernadette's itself, not even once I graduated from primary school and went on up the road to the secondary school with the rest of the thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan St. Bernadette's is housed in the original Gothic building that a group of French nuns established as a mission school way back in the early 1900s, with more rooms added on over the years as the number of pupils swelled. I found no fear in its dark corners or its echoing stairwells, or in the bats that hung from the ceilings or in the piles of bat poop all of us had to step over in the corridors, or even in the monkeys that watched us from the trees beyond the fence.

Other kids whispered about the ghosts that roamed St. Bernadette's or waited in the shadows to scare us in the bathrooms, told stories about wailing nuns and headless Japanese soldiers that had died bloody deaths on school grounds during the occu-

pation. Other kids went hunting for entrances to the maze of tunnels the soldiers had supposedly dug underneath the school to house ammunition and bodies. But I didn't bother listening. It changed nothing for me. I might not have fit in among the other girls. I might not have understood their jokes or their conversations or their ways. But it didn't matter. Within the walls of St. Bernadette's, I was happy, comforted, secure.

Now here I am, almost seventeen and in my last year of school. Everyone is busy making plans—college, university, matriculation, sixth form, public or private, overseas or local, self-funded or scholarships. This is what my mother also expects of me. Good grades, good job, good car, good house, good life. Then she can show her friends, the way she shows off her fancy branded handbags. *See what a good job I did, raising this perfect child? No husband also. See how I managed all on my own? See how she honors me and my sacrifices? See this life I have built, in which I want for nothing?* She doesn't mention the fact that she never needed to work at all, that my grandfather died when I was little and left her, his only daughter, with more money than she could spend in a lifetime.

Ahead of me three girls climb out of a school bus together. It's orange, the exact color of mandarins. They laugh and joke and take up much more of the sidewalk than they need to. "Come on!" they yell loudly at each other. "We have to go before it's too late!"

Before it's too late. I start walking faster, as if I'm the one they're talking to, as if they are waiting for me to catch up. For

just one second I think about running up to them, putting an arm over one girl's shoulder, laughing and teasing like I'm one of them. Part of the group. What would they say? How would they react?

I check my watch. The first bell is about to ring. I walk faster, but not fast enough to keep pace with the girls ahead. My mind chants a mantra in time with my footsteps: *Before it's too late, before it's too late, before it's too late.*

Khadijah

"Earth to Khadijah," Sumi sing-songs right in my ear, making me jump. I look up to see the other girls filing slowly off the bus. "We're here. Save your daydreams for later, can?"

I stick out my tongue like I'm five, and grab my backpack. I pivot on my heel and walk straight into the soft bulk of Uncle Gan, the bus driver. He is standing and looking at us. Arms crossed, a sour expression on his face. I smell the fresh-laundry scent of his wrinkled striped shirt, and something else. Something that immediately makes my heart start leaping uncontrollably in my chest. Something that sets alarm bells clanging throughout my entire body.

Cigarettes.

He smoked cigarettes too. The smell filled my nostrils until it felt like it was part of my bloodstream. There was no way to avoid it, not with his weight pressed on top of me. Later I swore I could still smell it even when the sheets had been washed. Even after we'd thrown them away. Even after I'd burned the mattress.

Three months of therapy, and I still sleep on the sofa in

the living room. My nightmares are all damp, groping, reaching hands and the smell of cigarettes.

DANGER, the voice in my head screams. *DANGER, DANGER, DANGER.* And suddenly I'm back in the darkness, drowning in it, drowning beneath the heavy weight that pins me down and won't let go, drowning in my own silence, and I want to run and scream and cry and throw up all at once, and, and, and

And there is a gentle hand on my elbow. A reassuring presence at my back. Sumi, I think. Flo. And I take a deep breath and try to focus.

You are on the bus. You are here, at St. Bernadette's. You are safe.

"You're okay," Flo whispers. "We've got you."

"You girls can go faster or not?" Uncle Gan grumbles, as he does every morning.

"Relax, Uncle," Sumi says with a jaunty smile. She guides me gently past him—*Hold your breath, Khad; try not to smell him*—and toward the door. "We're going."

"Your friend okay, ah? She looks like she wants to vomit." He frowns. In his voice I hear the healthy fear of a man who doesn't want to spend the morning cleaning barf off peeling pleather seats.

"She's fine lah Uncle. Don't worry." Sumi turns to me. "You are, right?" she asks softly.

I nod, even though it feels like my legs are about to collapse under me. Aishah is gone; everyone is gone. We're the last ones to get off. Just ahead of us, farther up the hill, the wrought-iron

gates of St. Bernadette's are flung open, like arms awaiting a hug. There is a tug, somewhere in my chest. *As usual,* I tell myself, clinging to it like a mantra. As usual.

The sharp *drrrrrrring* of the school bell sounds just as we step onto the pavement. Sumi swears under her breath.

"Come on," she says, already breaking into a run. "We're going to have to hurry so we can make it before the second bell. I can't afford another tardy slip. My mother already threatened to whack me with the feather duster last time."

"May I point out," Flo yells to her steadily advancing back as we struggle to keep up, "that not all of us are school runners like you, Miss Sumitra?"

But Sumi is too far ahead now, loping away from us on those long legs. Her cropped curls bounce in the wind. Flo might as well be talking to the shadows, or the monkeys chittering in the nearby trees.

"Typical," Flo mutters as she reaches up to retie her hair.

I grin a grin that's still a little wavy around the edges. I slip my arm through hers. *As usual,* I think. *All is as usual.*

"Come on," Flo tells me. "Let's go."

Assembly is uneventful, until the headmistress, Mrs. Beatrice, stands and walks to the podium. The tightness of her pencil skirt makes her steps small and forcefully dainty. The clack, clack, clack of her sensible black heels echoes through the silent hall. She clears her throat, and the mic whines in protest, making us all wince. "Good morning, young ladies."

"Good morning, Mrs. Beatrice," the hall murmurs back.

She clicks her tongue. "Are you still asleep? Again, with some energy, please."

"Good morning, Mrs. Beatrice," everyone around me says. It is marginally louder this time, and the headmistress smiles, thin-lipped and satisfied. "Very good," she says. "You will all, of course, recall the incident that happened in our school this past week."

An incident. Such an innocent word, as if someone lost their shoe or slipped in the corridor.

"I'm sure it was most distressing for many of you to see your friends afflicted in such a way." Mrs. Beatrice blinks as she scans the paper she's holding.

Someone has clearly laid out all the talking points she's supposed to hit. Afflicted. I close my eyes, just for a moment. I remember the sound of the screams. The way terror traced patterns on my skin. The trail of goose bumps it left in its wake.

"The teachers and staff of St. Bernadette's are, of course, always here for you. We have taken the appropriate steps to make sure all parts of the school have been, er, appropriately cleansed—"

Someone snorts, and soft laughter breaks through the hall.

Mrs. Beatrice raps the podium sternly. "Silence, please. Silence. As I said, the situation has been taken care of, and we are sure such occurrences will not happen again."

"I wonder what she thinks the actual cause was," Sumi whispers.

I manage a small shrug. I do not want to wonder.

"Shh." A prefect named Jane has somehow materialized at Sumi's elbow. Jane is the type of person who likes pointing out the teacher's mistakes. The type of person who takes particular pleasure in telling people what to do. "Stop talking. Pay attention." Bloody Jane.

Onstage, Mrs. Beatrice continues. "I understand it may be difficult, given what you have been through, so our school counselor, Mr. Bakri—" Mr. B half stands and gives an awkward wave. His grin is just a little too wide, a little too friendly. "Mr. Bakri will be on hand should you need someone to talk to, but of course you can also feel free to approach any teacher here. Otherwise, we trust in the resilience and strength of our girls and hope that you will go about your day as usual, always being sure to remember your role as representatives and ambassadors of our prestigious St. Bernadette's School."

Flo leans in. "In case you were wondering, she means, 'Don't embarrass us or make us look bad, because the whole world thinks we're cursed.'"

"Quiet!" Jane hisses.

"All right. Chill lah."

Once the speech is done, the teachers get the rest of assembly over with and send us off to our classes. 4 Cempaka is one floor up, sandwiched between 4 Anggerik and 4 Melati. The newer blocks, like the library and the form-five block, have slatted windows that open up to let the air in. But like in all the older classrooms at St. Bernadette's, there are no windows here.

Instead each of the rooms in the form-four block boasts two sets of massive wooden double doors opening up to narrow corridors. If you look to the right, you'll see the green hills; to the left, you'll see the canteen and tennis courts.

The three of us separate to settle into our seats. Teachers learned a long time ago to keep us apart. I'm surprised they allow us to be in the same class at all, to be honest.

I slide into place between Ranjeetha and Balqis. Ranjeetha is bland and inoffensive, like plain rice porridge your mom makes you when you're sick. Balqis breathes loudly through her mouth and is prone to telling stories that are entirely too personal.

"Morning, Khad," Ranjeetha says with a sunny smile.

I smile half-heartedly back. I know Ranjeetha doesn't expect a response. I like her a little more for it. Most of my classmates are used to this now, the whole me-not-talking thing. It's just that some are nicer about it than others.

"I am so tired," Balqis moans. "I don't know what I ate yesterday, but I cirit birit all night. Bathroom every hour. And the smell . . ."

I nod politely and keep my mouth even more firmly shut than before. This will not help me. Balqis doesn't need encouragement to overshare. She just needs an audience. The audience doesn't even really need to pay attention. They just have to be in her vicinity.

Thankfully, Puan Ramlah strides into the room right then. Puan Ramlah is both our class teacher and our English teacher. She can always be relied on for three things: motivational cli-

chés, smelling overwhelmingly of rose perfume, and an increasingly creative string of Malay curses when riled. It is therefore 4 Cempaka's solemn duty to rile her up as often as we can.

Today, however, Puan Ramlah doesn't seem to need riling. Her large chest heaves beneath the shiny satin of her baju kurung. She waves away the singsong of "Good mor-ning, Puan Ram-lah" as if it doesn't matter.

"Good morning, class," she says, sitting heavily in her chair at the front of the room. "How are you? How is everyone?"

"Good," the class choruses back.

"No, no, don't give me that." Puan Ramlah sits back and fans herself. I can see beads of sweat forming on her forehead. "I know some of you must still be dwelling on what happened last week. I thought we could take some time to talk about it. You know. Clear the air."

I feel my blood freeze in my veins. *I don't want to talk about it,* I think, clenching my teeth hard. My jaw begins to throb. I don't. I don't. I don't.

Balqis takes the bait. Of course it would be Balqis. "I feel pretty sad about it," she volunteers. "For all those girls, you know? One of them was this girl I know in 5 Anggerik. She used to live near my house in Ampang. Her brother played badminton with my brother in the evening. It was weird seeing her being carried out of her class like that, all sweaty and all. She looked like she didn't even know what happened to her. Kind of dazed macam tu . . ."

I squeeze my eyes shut. For just a moment I remember what