

Prologue

Greenbay Asylum, 1940.

Ismail's eyes darted to the rearview mirror of his taxi, a yellow Checker Model A, and stole a glance at the priest in the back. He hadn't been in proximity with an authority of the opposite faith before, especially not one that looked like him—dressed in a black cassock with a long golden pectoral cross hanging from his neck to his abdomen. He was used to preachers in coats and collars, standing at street corners dismissing the general attitude of the public and foreseeing the end of the world. This one looked more interested in whatever was going on in his head instead of outside of it. The priest looked to be in his mid-forties, bald, with a round face, smooth-shaved jaw, thin papery lips, hawk-like nose and a pair of inquisitive brown eyes under thick dark brows. Ismail noticed that the priest's left hand had been on the black briefcase by his side the entire time, while a black prayer bead was wrapped around the right.

As Ismail pulled away from the tarred road, turning into a dirt track that cut through the woods by the side of the road, he caught the priest mutter silently and rush through a sign of the cross. It was the first time he was seeing the priest speak or move since he got into his taxi. Ismail recalled that earlier no taxi driver had agreed to carry the priest, most of them peeling away from the curb only moments after they had been flagged down. A curious Ismail had watched everything unfold and swooped in; the frustration on the priest's face was just too much to ignore.

As he pulled to a stop in front of the priest, the man had stooped and blandly said:

“Greenbay Asylum”.

“Hop in,” Ismail replied.

The spark on the priest's face was undeniable. Almost anyone could tell he had not been expecting it.

“God bless you,” the priest said. “You're a good Samaritan and your reward will surely come.”

Ismail smiled and nods his head. Quite curiously, as he pulled away from the curb, he caught a taxi driver from across the street looking his way with an expression that Ismail could not quite place. It

was something between surprise, wonder, and pity. Then the taximan shook his head and turned away.

It's the asylum, Ismail had thought. The crazy stories they tell about that place. But he had driven people there before and he knew these stories were myths fabricated by the public to drum up some pizzazz in an otherwise lackluster town.

“Fuck!” Ismail screamed suddenly and slammed his foot into the brakes. But he was too late.

Ismail ran through the girl in the middle of the road and his heart nearly exploded. In that split second, he was convinced he had murdered a little child. She seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and all he got was a flash of wet dark gleaming hair and a dirty dress that barely clung to her shoulders. But in that same split second, everything changed. The girl went right through the cab, like she was molded from smoke, and slammed into Ismail.

The Checker Model A screeched to a stop in the middle of the track, provoking a cloud of dust that climbed up lazily.

Ismail's heart pummeled against the walls of his chest as he looked straight into the rearview with eyes as wide as pin-pong balls and an intensity that could shatter the mirror. A chill ran down his spine as he stared at the girl sitting at the back of his taxi. She felt cold, like stone, but her ragged wet shoulder-length dark hair was real. He could not see a face no matter how hard he stared, and that too was real.

Ya Allah, he thought, begging for mercy as his skin prickled with bone-chilling dread.

The priest leaned forward, and asked. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Ismail repeated in disbelief. “This girl,” he gestured ahead of him, “just walk out into middle of road. She's right next to you.”

“What girl?” the priest asked. He glanced beside him and returned to Ismail frowning.

“This—”

Ismail's words faded as he stared at the rearview. Then he leaned closer, knitting his brows. The girl was gone. Vanished into thin air, and he never saw her disappear. It was almost as if she was never

there. The priest was the only one at the back of the taxi, and there was no indication, not even the slightest, that there had been a visitor.

“I swear I saw a girl in middle of road,” Ismail said. “She must have—”

He paused.

Then he exhaled audibly, started the car again and carried on down the road.

As Ismail pulled up to the towering iron-wrought gates of the asylum, he knew he would have to apologize to the priest for the stunt he pulled earlier, even though he knew he had seen something. Using his palms, he brushed off the insects crawling on his neck and arms. Then he pushed his head out the window as the priest counted out seven neat one-dollar bills from a wad and handed it over to him.

“Thank you,” Ismail replied. “Listen, err, I’m sorry for back there. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” the priest replied quickly, staring through the bars on the gate to the mansion several feet behind.

Ismail clicked his tongue in irritation as he brushed his arms and neck rapidly. The insects were back again, making him wonder where they were coming from. As if on cue, he looked at the dashboard and saw a row of small ants walking across the entire length of the dashboard. They were on the steering wheel too, using the hands he kept on it as a bridge to get on his body. A little pissed, Ismail began to use his hands to swat them off his car.

“Is something wrong?” the priest asked.

“Sorry,” Ismail smiled at him. “It’s just ants.”

“Ants?”

“Yeah, they’re everywhere in car. Don’t know how they got in. See.”

Ismail turned to show the priest the ants. And he paused; his face frozen in a deep frown.

For the second time in a row, Ismail was confused. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, but it did not change a thing. There was nothing on his dashboard—no ants milling over the car and getting on his body—nothing.

His heart pounding, he looked at the priest. "I no lie to you," he said. "I swear—"

"You should leave," the priest said with a sense of urgency. "Leave now."

Ismail shook his head, disappointed. Then he started the car and drove off.

Father Anthony coughed as he stared at the towering black wrought-iron gates of the asylum. There was a wrought-iron sign in the middle of the gate that said: Greenbay Asylum.

The mansion, a massive stone monster modeled in true Corinthian architectural fashion slumbered behind the gate. A few guards, men in grey overalls, stood lazily at the stairs leading up to the entrance, armed with prods that dangled by their thighs from their belt loops, they looked just menacing enough for the people they kept out than for those they let in.

Suddenly, a loud screeching tore through the silence followed by a resounding crash and a loud whoosh. Father Anthony spun around, his eyes widened and he made a quick sign of the cross. As he breathed heavily, he found himself unable to pull his eyes away from the sight. A few meters away, a burning yellow Checker Model A was crushed against a massive oak.

Exhaling through his lips, he steadied his breathing as the gate behind him creaked and a couple of guards rushed out.

This is not time for fear, Father Anthony told himself. There's work to do.

Tightening his grip on his briefcase, he turned around quietly, walked past the guards and through the gates of the asylum.