ADULTS ONLY

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# STEALING THE JEWELS

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TRANSGENDER TALES OF Transformation

SICK PUPPY PRESS

CASSIE STEWART

# STEALING THE JEWELS

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A Tales of Transformation story

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# Stealing the Jewels

Lit only be the headlights from the car they stole, the three young men were crowded in a tight circle. Even in the middle of the night, with no one around, they still didn't want anyone to see what they were doing. They would be dead within hours.

That is, unless they could save themselves. The didn't ask for this, but there they were. Criminals, on the run from every law enforcement agency in the country, and from the people who had paid them to do the job.

Nate had been drinking his woes away last night when he was approached by a large, mean looking thug. At first he thought he was in for a some kinda fight. But instead, he had a proposal. He had found Nate at the right time. He'd just lost his trucking job, and any chance of making his rent.

"You look like you've got a story," the thug said. "Kind of hard up?"

"None of your business," Nate replied.

Two more beers and Nate was more than willing to spill his story. He'd been driving a truck for over three months, and he'd started to think he had a good thing going. No complaints, regular hours, a steady paycheck. He could see the allure of having a regular job.

Then, this morning, it was all done. He came to the depot and they took his ID, gave him a check for what he was owed and told him to leave the property in five minutes.

"So you can drive a truck," the man said.

"Not much of a skill," Nate answered. "A lot of people can. People cheaper than me, I guess."

"Corporations, huh? They do whatever the fuck they want."

"Corporations," Nate answered, taking a sip.

Of course, it hadn't been a corporation that had fired Nate specifically. No, he was fired because he was being set up. His boss knew how hard up Nate was. He knew how he'd do anything for money. The thug who was buying Nate another beer worked for him. He'd been sent here to recruit Nate, and he knew that Nate would take it.

"I need a truck taken from downtown to a warehouse. You get paid when you deliver it. Five hundred now, five hundred on delivery."

Nate studied the man's eyes. They were not used to being nice and pleasant. The offer was all kinds of wrong, but the rent number was all Nate could think about. It was that or start begging on the street.

"That's a lot for a drive across town," Nate said.

"Well, the truck isn't ours," the man replied. "That's the tricky part."

At a construction site near the airport, the three young men had gathered that night. Nate had recruited Aaron and Jayden, two of his buddies he'd met in his time in the city. Jayden was delivering dinners uptown, making less than enough to get by, but able to keep the lights on. He knew the city like the back of his hand by this point, and how to get a payload across town in record time. Aaron was in construction, at least he was at the moment, and he knew how to hotwire a car.

They were the logical choices. A little negotiation with the thug, and he was going to give them $250 each for their contribution to the effort.

By the next night, with steam coming rom the sewers and the crossing lights flashing red, Aaron and Jayden were helping him steal the truck. The first clue that something was wrong was when they realized it was outside a museum.

At 2:37 *precisely* they were told they needed to be on a certain street corner. At that time, they needed to be ready to get to a truck that would be waiting 57 feet away for 123 seconds before someone came for it.

At 2:37, *precisely,* there were no security guards. The truck was unattended. Nate had the door open, Aaron took care of the ignition. In less than 123 seconds, they were ready to go.

They expected stolen goods, that was obvious. Something like an old tapestry or a stone column from an Aztec civilization. Something that had no value to them, or anybody else, but was valuable to the right people. There was just a single lonely crate in the truck. A metal reinforced crate. Simple enough. They fired up the truck and headed off.

Then Jayden, as he lost his balance around a turn, stumbled against the crate, and its lid shifted open.

The jewels caught the weak overhead light, sparkling and shining. The curse of generations, that kind of shine.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Nate saw the royal insignia embedded in the velvet. Jayden backed away from the crate.

"This is a big deal," Jayden said.

Aaron picked up one of the necklaces. It weighed ten pounds and was gold, diamonds, rubies and emeralds arranged in a gaudy display of opulence. "This can't be real."

Nate tried to keep his voice steady. "This is a setup."

"What do you mean?" Jayden asked, panic showing in his eyes.

"I was told this was just a job, a quick one — but this is a heist," Nate said. "They don't let guys like us handle this kind of thing. It's too valuable. The only reason they wanted us is so we can take the blame if we get caught."

"So we get arrested when the cops come?" Aaron asked. "They throw us in jail?"

"Aaron, buddy, the cops will only find corpses," Nate said. "We'll be killed before we can talk."

"Killed?"

"Those jewels are worth millions, dude. Hundreds of millions. That's enough to make sure there are no witnesses."

Jayden was hyperventilating. "What can we do? What can we do?"

"Look out for ourselves," Aaron said. "Take a left here, down the alley. It'll buy us a minute or two."

Nate and Jayden carried their ends of the crate while Aaron guided them through a gap in the parking garage's unfinished foundation. Trucks rumbled past on the street above. Somewhere nearby, a concrete mixer groaned into motion.

"Careful," Aaron whispered. He kept his voice even, but his eyes flicked toward the entrance, worried.

Jayden adjusted his grip. "What do you think I'm doing?"

Nate grunted and readjusted his grip.

With a dusty thud, the crate was dumped in the dirt. This was the construction site where Aaron worked. Or, at least were he *used* to work There was no going back, now. None of them could go back to their lives.

They lowered the crate into a gap. Aaron covered it with gravel. "They'll be filling this in five hours," Aaron said. "It's scheduled for first thing in the morning."

The project was a parking garage. A temporary one. It would be in use for five years, waiting for a lease to run out, and then an office park would be built in the same spot.

"In five years, they'll jackhammer all this up," Arron had told them on the way. "When they do, we can get the crate back."

"That'll give us enough time to let the heat die down," Nate said.

Jayden laughed and shook his head. "Wow, that sounds like a bad movie cliché."

"If there's a way real criminals talk, I don't know it. All I got is bad TV cop show clichés."

When they finished, there was a foot of dirt and gravel covering the crate. They would be long gone by the time it was filled, but it looked just like any other inch of dirt the rest of the foundation would be poured over. Jayden wiped his palms on his jacket. "I hate how nervous we look."

"I hate this shit," Aaron said.

"In five years," Nate said, "we can come back here, dig it up, and get rich."

"How do we sell it?"

Aaron shrugged. "We have five years to figure that out."

"Yeah." Nate tried to smile. "No contact. No calls. No nothing. We can't let anyone know where this is. We don't speak of it until the day we come back, five years from now. Deal?"

They all looked at each other, wondering what the hell they could do. It was all happening so fast. It was hard to know what was the right thing to do.

"Deal," Aaron said.

"Yeah," Jayden muttered.

"We should go."

"See you guys then," Aaron said. "I guess."

"I guess," Jayden replied.

They left without shaking hands. Aaron turned back to the city, Jayden crossed toward the busier streets, and Nate walked east alone. Each kept his pace ordinary and his face composed.

Behind them, sirens started to whine. It was on. The cops knew. And with every moment from now on, the cops would be getting closer. They were now on the run.

Nate drove, hands tight on the wheel, his knuckles white. The road stretched ahead in a blur of asphalt and the occasional flicker of passing streetlights. The weight of the moment, the fear, the confusion, settled like a rock in his stomach. The police were looking for him. They thought he was a criminal, the mob wanted him dead. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think.

He hadn't even decided if he was really going to do this. But he sure as hell knew they wouldn't believe him if he just waltzed into a police station and surrendered. They wouldn't listen to the truth. They'd twist it, like they always did, into something incriminating, something that suited their narrative. He was just a pawn to them. Another scapegoat to hide the truth. But there was no time to think about that now. He needed to get out of the city.

The mountains were the only option left. A place to hide, to regroup, to try and figure out what came next. He didn't know the first thing about living in the wild. He'd never been the type to camp, to hike, to live in

nature. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd stepped into a park.

He was running on fumes, literally and metaphorically. His fuel gauge flickered on empty. The engine sputtered, groaning, pleading for a rest. He pulled into the nearest gas station, a lonely spot off the highway, its neon lights flickering, the last remnants of hope in a world that had turned against him. There were no cars in the lot. The place was deserted.

As he cut the engine, the sudden silence was deafening. His heart was hammering. He glanced around. No one was there. The night air was sharp, cool against his skin. He stepped out of the car, keeping an eye on the darkened road. His instincts screamed at him to keep moving, to stay low, to blend into the shadows. The sound of the gas pump being pulled from the stand was harsh in the quiet, and it felt like everyone in five miles could hear it.

As he filled the tank, he couldn't help but glance around, waiting for the sound of sirens, the distant hum of an engine, the buzz of something that would tell him his moment of peace had ended. He stood there, frozen for a moment, eyes scanning the horizon. Nothing. But that didn't mean they weren't out there, just waiting for him to slip up.

The fuel clicked off, and he shoved the pump back into place, slamming the cap shut. He checked his wallet. His cash was low, but it was enough to get him where he needed to go. Probably.

With one last glance at the dark, empty road behind him, he climbed back into the car and started the engine, the sound too loud in the stillness. He pulled out of the station, his foot heavy on the pedal. The headlights cut through the night, guiding him toward the mountains, his refuge for the next five years.

The sun beat down on the open desert around him as he pulled his car into a small, barren rest stop. The sign read "Rest Area: No Services." It was a reminder that he was truly in the middle of nowhere. He had

never been this far from home before. The tires crunched against the gravel as he parked.

It had been days since he'd had a proper rest, and even longer since he'd eaten. He'd hardly slept, too tangled in his own thoughts, too on edge by everything that had gone on. His stomach growled in protest, loud and insistent. The last real meal he'd had was so long ago that he couldn't remember what it was. He slapped the steering wheel in frustration, trying to shake the tiredness from his mind.

He climbed out of the car, dragging his feet toward the vending machine. The heat of the desert air pressed against his skin as he fumbled with the change in his pocket. The snacks inside seemed like a taunt. He didn't have enough money, so he gave the machine a big shake with his shoulder. Then another. After a few more attempts, two bags of pretzels finally dropped. It felt like winning the megaball jackpot.

He shuffled over to the picnic table where a young woman sat alone, her posture stiff, her gaze distant. He couldn't help but notice her. She was in a traditional middle eastern cloak that even covered her head. She was about his age, maybe younger. Her body trembled slightly, as if the chill of the open desert wind was too much for her to handle, which made no sense in this heat. Her clothes were worn, her shoes beaten up from walking what must have been miles. She looked like she'd been out here a while, and since his was the only car parked here, she had nowhere to go.

For a moment, he just stood there, wondering if she'd noticed him. Then he took a deep breath and decided to break the silence.

He sat down across from her, a little awkward, his hands fumbling with the pretzels. "Hey," he said, offering her one of the bags. "I don't know when the last time you ate was, but if you're hungry..."

She turned her head slowly, eyes narrowed for a moment, evaluating him, before she grabbed the bag from his hands with a sharp, quick movement. She didn't say anything at first. Her face was unreadable, but as she opened the bag and started eating, he saw how hungry she truly was.

He started to chew on his own pretzels, watching her. Finally, she spoke, her voice soft but desperate. "You're running, too," she said, and it wasn't a question, but a statement.

Pretzels

He glanced at her, surprised to be read so easily. It felt almost like she was reading his mind. "No," he said. "Just a tourist."

For a long while, the two of them sat there in silence, the quiet stretching between them, broken only by the rustle of the wind.

Eventually, she spoke again, more hesitantly this time. "My name is Zafaya." She didn't look at him when she said it, as if it was a name she wasn't entirely comfortable with anymore. "I'm from Saudi Arabia," she continued, voice cracking just a bit. "I came here to visit relatives I've never met. But I ran away before they picked me up at the airport. They... they want to force me into... a life I don't want to live." She paused, gathering her strength. "I can't go back. I won't. I've seen too much."

"Yeah, tough break," Nate said, and immediately felt like an idiot. It was what he'd say to a coworker whose cat had died.

"They've sent people after me," she said, voice trembling now, more from fear than the cold. "I know it. They won't stop until they find me. They'll drag me back, force me to be what they want me to be." Her eyes finally met his, and for the first time, they seemed alive. "I won't go back. They'll try to fix me. But I'm not broken!"

She looked at him, then to his car, the only car in the parking lot. "You have a car?" she asked. The implication was clear. She wanted him to help her, to drive her somewhere.

But he was no better off than she was. He was on the run, just trying to survive. His mind was already spinning from his own mess, and adding her? It was too much.

"Don't even think about it," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm traveling alone. I don't need more to worry about."

The words were letting her down, he knew, but there was nothing he could do. He had no safe place to offer, no plan, no resources. He was running, just like her, and he barely knew what the next hour would bring.

Zafaya didn't say anything for a long time, just continued to eat her pretzels in silence. He wondered how she got here. Maybe a hitchhiker? Maybe she got left behind.

He opened his mouth to say something, to offer what comfort he could, but exhaustion hit him like a wave. His eyelids felt heavy. The fight to keep his focus slipped away from him, and he tried to fight it, but it was futile.

He looked at Zafaya, who was now staring at him, the desperation in her eyes clear as she saw the way his shoulders slumped. She didn't say anything at first, but then he heard her voice, faint and shaky, pleading. "Please... help me. Please don't leave me here."

But he couldn't help her. He couldn't even stop this fatigue as his body, starved and tired beyond reason, finally gave in. "Gotta keep moving," he mumbled. "Can't take on any passengers..."

"Please, sir," she said. "I beg of you. Please..."

He'd only meant to close his eyes for a second.

Nate woke with a start, his senses immediately bombarded by the sound of muffled voices and the oppressive heat of the desert air. The dry smell of dust clung to his skin, and he blinked rapidly, struggling to shake off sleep. Everything felt foggy, and the familiar ache of exhaustion pulled at his limbs.

He opened his eyes and was met with a sharp realization: several large men wearing sunglasses were standing over him, their thick bodies casting dark shadows over the picnic table. Their eyes were locked on him, their expressions grim. Were they cops? Had they finally tracked him down?

"Zafaya," one of them said, his voice thick with an accent Nate couldn't place.

He blinked again, trying to focus, but his body felt heavy, like it was still trapped in the fog of sleep. The world tilted for a moment as he sat up slowly, and that was when he noticed it. The unmistakable feeling of something strange on his head. He reached up, fingers brushing the soft fabric of a hijab wrapped around his scalp. His hands trembled as he felt the weight of rings on his fingers, the sharp metallic touch unfamiliar. There was a shawl on his shoulders, and his face was covered.

Before he could make sense of it all, the familiar sound of a sputtering engine cut through the desert stillness, drawing his attention toward the car. His car. The one he'd been trying to escape in for days. The engine roared to life, and he saw it: Zafaya, sitting behind the wheel. She was driving off, taking his meager possessions with her, his wallet, his identity, everything he had.

A surge of panic flooded his chest. He wanted to move, to chase after her, but before he could even stand, a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, pushing him back down with a force that left no room for resistance.

The men were still speaking, their voices becoming more insistent. "Zafaya, you have betrayed us."

They couldn't be thinking he was... Zafaya? He tried to speak, to explain, but all that came out was a muffled noise. A rough hand covered his mouth, cutting off any further attempt at communication. He thrashed, attempting to pull away, but it was no use. The more he struggled, the tighter their grip became.

Nate could barely breathe from the gag stuffed in his mouth as they bound his wrists with zip ties, pulling them tight until his hands tingled with the loss of circulation. The men continued their chatter, oblivious to the fact that they had the wrong person. They weren't the brightest people he'd ever come in contact with, likely muscle hired to find and abduct Zafaya.

In a moment of clarity, the pieces clicked together. While he was asleep, Zafaya must have taken his keys. She must have dressed him up to look like her: the hijab, the rings, the shawl. If he had been able to see himself, he would have seen the rough makeup Zafaya had clumsily applied to his face. The clothes were a perfect disguise, hiding his true identity beneath layers of fabric. With most of his head and face covered, they saw only what they wanted to see. A young woman with the same build, her features hidden beneath the clothes. They thought he was her.

He tried to shout, but the tape over his mouth was tight like a clamp. He thrashed again, his panic growing, but the men easily subdued him, quickly hoisting him off the bench and dragging him toward the waiting van.

*Pretzels,* he thought, absurdly. That's what she got his car for.

"You're going to make us very rich men," one of them said, his voice harsh. "Your family looks forward to seeing you again, Zafaya."

Everything around him moved in a blur, the dust swirling up around his feet as he was shoved into the van. The door slammed shut behind him, the metal sound reverberating. As the van drove away, he realized with chilling certainty that this was really happening. He had no idea what to expect now.

The van was heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke and sweat. Nate's hands were bound tight, his mouth muffled with a cloth that made it difficult to breathe properly. He tried to struggle, but it was futile. The hum of the engine was the only sound besides his own panicked breaths.

The ride felt endless. The vehicle jostled over uneven terrain, with abrupt shakes and tremors, and he tried to keep track of where he was going, but it was impossible to tell. Each bump in the road sent a wave of nausea through him, and the constant pounding gave him a headache.

When the van finally came to a halt, the doors opened with a metallic groan. Quickly, he was hauled out onto the ground. He staggered, disoriented, barely able to stay on his feet as the men dragged him toward a building. The compound was large, nestled in some quiet, isolated area he couldn't recognize. It was surrounded by high walls that made him feel like a prisoner, which he had a good idea was exactly what he was.

They brought him inside, his bound wrists pulled tight behind him. The house was dark and sparsely furnished. His heart raced, worried about what was going to become of him, alone, lost, and scared for his life.

The men pushed him forward into a room where a group of people, women and older men, stood waiting. The women were dressed conservatively, their heads covered, and the men, though they didn't speak to him directly, watched with cold eyes.

The language they spoke was foreign, rapid-fire Arabic he couldn't begin to understand. They spoke to him, and though he couldn't

understand the words, the tone was clear. He was an outcast. He was Zafaya, their runaway relative who had become rebellious and escaped their control. Their words were angry with accusation and disdain, and it was clear that they expected him to comply with whatever they were saying.

They seemed convinced beyond any doubt that he was Zafaya. If only he could show them, if only he could convince them. But to them, he was pretending not to understand his native language, and was simply playing some sort of game. He recalled, dimly, the words Zafaya had spoken to him before she stole his car. Her family had sent her to the U.S. to be made into the kind of woman she didn't want to be. She had fled from them, escaping their rigid control, knowing what they had planned for her future.

Finally the tape was removed from his mouth, and he tried to speak, to explain, but it was hopeless.

"I'm not her," he said, his voice cracked from the desert. "That girl! I'm a man! She stole my car! Does anyone here speak English?"

"She speaks English very well," one of the men said to the room. "Rich people's school."

They laughed, tired and unkind. When he shouted that he was a man, that he was not Zafaya, they simply looked at him like he was lying. They mocked his words, shaking their heads in disbelief, as if his protests were nothing more than the lies of a frightened girl. Did they even understand him? It didn't seem to matter.

He tried to take off the hood over is head to show him his short hair, but his arms were grabbed, nearly ripped off his body. To show a woman's hair was a sin, it was clear. And he was shouted down and forced to cower in a a corner as they spat angry words at him. One was threatening to beat him with his shoe.

They shoved him into a small room. No furniture. Not even a stool. Just a pillow and a mat on the dusty, dirty floor.

The next day, early in the morning when the sky was still dark, they came into the room, covering his mouth when he made the first sound.

They forced him to sit in a corner. There were others there, all dressed as he was in a shapeless coverings. He given a book and made to study it: the Qur'an. He couldn't read a word of the Arabic, but it didn't matter. They didn't ask, they just forced him. One of the women said the words and then he repeated them. Another woman forced him to keep his eyes forward, staring at the written Arabic he didn't understand. The words felt insane as he mimicked speaking them. The men directed him to pray, to perform rituals he'd never done in his life. They watched him, their intense eyes boring into him, making sure that he did everything as expected.

He slept in a room with four women, in his clothes. Talking to the was useless. They didn't speak English and the moment he said anything, an angry man would enter and threaten to thrash him. Nate helped with breakfast and dinner as he was shown how to do his part in preparing food. Each day, the cycle continued. The clothes, the prayers, the Qur'an.

Just play along, he told himself every night, listening to four women breathe in the dark. They'll relax. Somebody will get careless. He'd find a phone.

Over time he figured out more about where he was. It was a walled square of buildings in the middle of nothing. Arizona? New Mexico? Utah? It had a mosque with a green dome. A large building with a dormitory, kitchen, and half-empty rooms. A generator hummed off in the distance. A courtyard was in the middle, made of packed earth. Date palms were lined along the north wall. A flag fluttered and snapped in the desert wind. There were about sixty people, if he wasn't counting people twice. All these arabs looked the same to him.

Nate was in a small room with a sleeping mat and a dresser and a window with bars. A woman in a black abaya brought him water and dates and set them on the dresser every morning. Then she left. They were good.

That was the other thing he learned about the place. Nobody talked. People moved through the courtyard on their own errands and did not greet each other. They rarely nodded. Sometimes they said a word or two. Mostly they were silent, and the silence was not hostile, it was just default. Life in the compound did not require conversation.

There was a call to prayer five times a day, which he was forced to participate in, even if he had no idea what was going on. He just kneeled and bent over every few seconds. There was a room where young men, young women and adults kneeled on thin pillows and recited. The kitchen was where women cooked in shifts. The generator ran from six to ten in the evening and made the lights flicker.

The compound was a program. People arrived here from all over. Different ethnicities, but mostly Arab. They spoke different languages when they arrived, brought by relatives or by recruiters. They were made into, what looked to his eyes, like cultists. They became devout fundamentalists. Some of them were teenagers. Some were adults. Some had been here for years. Some had arrived the same week as Nate.

Nobody told him this. He figured it out by watching. Talking was not encouraged here, and trying to speak in anything other than Arabic was punished.

He would sit in the courtyard and someone would sit nearby and neither of them would dare speak. They wouldn't even look at each other. No eye contact. He would eat in the small room off of the kitchen and the person across from him would eat, staring only at the food, and then leave without ceremony.

Three weeks into being a prisoner, they started injecting him with something. He felt nauseous, dizzy, weak. Two months later, his skin became smoother, more delicate. Was it possible they were injecting him with hormones? Did they know he wasn't a woman? Or did they just want "Zafaya" to be more feminine? It was impossible to say.

They let his hair grow, and at first he wasn't sure why. Maybe they simply didn't know they should be cutting it. One day a woman handed

him a bottle of oil. One day another woman brushed it out for him without a word. By the fourth month it reached his shoulders.

They also had him to care for his skin. They gave him a jar of cream and a bar of soap. He also had a small pair of scissors, for his nails. His eyebrows were shaped one afternoon by a woman who worked in silence and then left. His arms and legs were waxed by a woman who pointed at a chair and pointed at his sleeve and then did the work without explaining what she was doing.

The shape of him changed slowly. Less bread, more vegetables. That's all they served him anymore. They had him walking the perimeter every morning and every evening. The pounds came off very slowly, almost too slow for him to notice. But he did notice.

Eventually they provided him with new clothes. First, the shawl. Then a long tunic. Then an abaya, plain, black, shapeless. He was given five of them. He hated it at first. It was hot.

Then the underthings. A soft cotton bra, left on his dresser without comment. He wore it for fear he'd be punished if he didn't, even though it did nothing. Then a different one. Then a padded one.

Then the shoes. Then the jewelry. A ring. A bracelet. A pair of small gold earrings, which required piercing his ears, which in turn required a needle and a potato and a lot of swearing.

And the shots continued.

Months had passed since he'd first arrived at the compound, but he had lost track of time. With each passing day, it became harder to resist. He barely recognized himself in the mirror anymore. The face that stared back at him was softer, rounder, more feminine. The women had shown him how to do makeup, making his eyes look bewitching and dark, exactly the way theirs did. The face no longer felt like his. These changes had been subtle at first, but now they were undeniable. There was no doubt they had been giving him hormones, as his hips had filled out, breasts had begun to form, and his whole body felt more out of sorts.

The captors continued their relentless push. He woke each day to a schedule he had to follow. Prayers, study, modesty. It had become second nature to him, a rhythm his mind was practically locked into. He wore the hijab as if it had always been a part of his outfit, a quiet, comforting companion in everything he did.

Once, a delivery man had stood in the courtyard holding a crate of food, and Nate had opened his mouth to speak to him in English. The man looked at him waiting for him to speak, and Nate closed his mouth again. What would he even say? *I'm a man, please help.*

No, the driver would just ask someone what was going on. He'd be condemning himself to a beating if he spoke. He might even get the delivery driver beaten as well.

When he was alone, there was a silence he found uncomfortable. He preferred to work with the other women, and not be by himself. They kept him isolated from the world, enforced by the tall walls of the compound. But it wasn't as foreboding as it once was. He'd come to understand that he would be free, just as soon as he was deemed ready. He wouldn't be a prisoner forever. If he just did what they told him, he'd be released.

So he focused on finishing his training. The routines, the prayers, the modest dress: these things had started to feel comforting. They'd replaced the constant fear that once haunted him. He'd come to accept his fate. He was even trying to hide his true gender now. The more he acted like the other women, the better things went for him.

The name no longer felt alien, as it once had. *Zafaya.* When someone called it across a room, he turned before he realized he was responding. It was a nice name. There was no shame in being thought of as a wife, a mother, or a woman of faith. The thought didn't disturb him as much now. The lessons had taught him so much. He understood, now, how important it was to respect his family, how to do what was needed of a woman in a loving, worthy family.

He could now speak some Arabic, though the words he could say were simple. He'd picked things up from the Qur'an study and from conversations he heard. Words of prayer, words of respect. It was just enough language to say the things a Muslim woman was expected to say.