

Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam.

MARIAM'S TRIAL HAD taken place the week before. There was no legal council, no public hearing, no cross-examining of evidence, no appeals. Mariam declined her right to witnesses. The entire thing lasted less than fifteen minutes.

The middle judge, a brittle-looking Talib, was the leader. He was strikingly gaunt, with yellow, leathery skin and a curved beard. He wore eyeglasses that magnified his eyes and made now yellow the whites were. His neck looked too thin to support his head.

"You admit to this?" he asked again in a tired voice.

The man nodded. Or maybe he didn't. It was hard to tell. He had a pronounced shaking of his hands and head that reminded Mariam of Malah Faizullah's tremor. When he stopped, he did not reach for his cup. He motioned to the square-shouldered man to his left, who respectfully brought it to his lips. After, the Talib closed his eyes gently, a quiet and elegant gesture of gratitude.

Mariam found a disarming quality about the man. He spoke, it was with a tinge of guile and tenderness. His smile was patient. He did not look at Mariam despicably. He did not address her with a tone of accusation but with a soft tone of apology.

"You fully understand what you're saying?" the bony-faced Talib to the judge's right, not the tea giver, said. This one was the youngest of the three. He spoke quickly and with emphatic, arrogant confidence. He'd been irritated that Mariam could not

...speak Pashto. He was one of those quarrelsome young men who saw authority, who saw order everywhere,

"I do understand,"

Talib said. "God has made us different. Women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require only one male witness but two

"I admit to what I did, Talib," Mariam said. "But, if I hadn't, I would have said she was strangling her."

"So you say. But, then, women swear to all sorts of things all

"It's the truth."

...esses? Other than your *ambaghi*?"

"I do," said Mariam.

...men." He threw up his hands and snickered.

It was the sickly Talib who spoke next.

"I have a doctor in Peshawar," he said. "A fine, young Pakistani. I saw him a month ago, and then again last week. I said, tell me the truth, friend, and he said to me, three months, Mullah Faizullah, maybe six at most—all God's will, of course."

...he nodded discreetly at the square-shouldered man on his left

...and took another sip of the tea he was drinking. His trembling hands

"It does not frighten

...me to leave this life. My only son left

...upon sorrow long after we can bear no more. No, I believe I shall gladly take my leave when the time comes.

"What frightens me, *hamshira*, is the day God summons me