

***Alma's  
Loyalty***

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# Chapter 1

I was in my room completing my homework when my mother called me. I bookmarked my Maths textbook and walked down the hallway, hearing a conversation in progress. We had visitors, a regular event in our household.

I entered the living room and saw my parents on the couch, with a trio I'd never seen before.

'This is my daughter Alma.' Mum made the introductions in Bosnian. 'This is Arnesa and her husband Nermin, and Arnesa's mother Enisa.'

'*Bože sačuvaj,*' Arnesa said, which meant God Forbid, her mouth formed an O in surprise as she scrutinised my face. 'She looks exactly like Sabiha.'

'Who is Sabiha?' Mum asked.

'Esad's other daughter,' Arnesa said. 'We saw Bahra a month ago in Melbourne.'

I didn't understand what this stranger was saying. My father had another daughter? I looked at my mother for help.

'Esad doesn't have another daughter,' Mum said.

'Yes, he does. Sabiha, from his first marriage with Bahra. She is the spitting image of her father and sister.' Nermin nodded to me.

My legs felt weak. My father was married before? I turned to my father, hoping to get confirmation this was all a lie. His face was white.

‘Alma, return to your room,’ Mum commanded.

I walked down the hall, hiding in the alcove so I could eavesdrop.

‘How could you not know?’ Arnesa demanded. ‘Bahra was four months pregnant when you moved to Hobart.’

There was an awkward silence before Mum jumped in. ‘Bahra told him the child wasn’t his.’

‘Aren’t there tests to find out?’ Arnesa said. ‘After all, you both know that she wasn’t of sound mind.’

‘Do you have Bahra’s phone number?’ my father asked.

‘Of course,’ Nermin said.

I heard the ping of a SMS. Nermin must have sent my father the phone number in an SMS.

My father passed in front of the hallway and went to his study, closing the door behind him with finally.

‘My apologies. Maybe we should reschedule this visit,’ Mum said, walking our guests to the front door.

I inched down the hallway and closer to the study. Mum closed the front door after our guests and walked to stand in front of the study door to eavesdrop with her back to me.

Dad initially spoke in a regular voice and then shouted, ‘You should have told me she was my daughter.’

Mum opened the study door. Dad was staring at his phone with a distraught face, tears streaming down his face. ‘What am I going to do now?’ He fell into Mum’s arms, his sobbing rending the air.

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*Beep, beep.*

I opened my eyes, staring at the glaring white ceiling before me. I lifted my arm and hit the snooze button, discombobulated that I was reliving the most traumatic day of my life in my dreams again. Even though it had happened three months

before, I always woke up from this dream with the same feeling of betrayal and shock.

I dressed, trying on half a dozen outfits before settling on jeans and a black-and-white striped stretchy top. My new school had no uniform, and I'd debated long and hard about what to wear. Mum's advice was black pants and a white shirt. 'It's a good idea to be smart casual,' she'd said, but I was afraid that was too formal.

I went to the bathroom, washing my face and looking at my frightened green eyes in the mirror. I tried to tell myself that everything would be alright, but if I had learnt anything up until this point, it was that things can always get worse.

I practiced my smile in the mirror until my cheeks were sore. It was important that it looked careless and natural, a mask that I could hide the quiet terror filling me. I stretched my lips wider and pushed my cheeks deeper into my face. That would have to do. It was the first day of term three and I was beginning my third school in year 10.

'Alma,' my little sister Sanela called out my name as she pounded on the bathroom door.

I opened the door, and she rushed in like a tornado. She got her hairbrush from the drawer and handed it to me. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and brushed her hair, while Sanela stood between my legs brushing her Barbie's blonde curls, her little five year old hands finding it difficult to manipulate the tie around the doll's ponytail.

I looked at the clock. Mum was due home soon from her night shift as a nurse. She usually came home before we had to leave for school.

'Done.' I breathed out a sigh of relief. I still had to do my hair and check my outfit one last time before breakfast.

'Now do Barbie.' Sanela thrust the doll toward me.

'I don't have time.' I stopped when Sanela looked at me with pleading brown eyes. It was quicker to tie the doll's hair into a

makeshift ponytail than argue. 'Here.' I gave the doll back when I finished.

I carefully brushed my blonde hair back, ensuring that it parted directly in the middle, then stood in profile and smoothed down my top.

My younger brother Ali appeared in the bathroom doorway and met my eyes in the mirror. He and Sanela took after Mum with their brown hair, brown eyes, and round faces. 'Dad's waiting.'

He didn't need to say anymore. I knew Dad was tapping his watch, his patience straining. As a doctor, he was used to being the one who set the schedule.

'Get your backpack,' I ordered Sanela and went to my bedroom to do the same.

As we walked down the stairs, I looked through the round window that was at eye level across from me. Through it I could see the street outside, the roofs of the housing estate we lived in, filling the horizon like little matchbox houses. They all looked alike with their square bricked walls, carefully manicured lawns, and precisely placed plants.

We'd moved to Melbourne three months ago, and I still yearned for our house in Hobart. We'd lived off the beaten track with tall trees hugging our house, cocooning us from the rest of the world. I used to look out the window for hours, my eyes following the leaves as they danced in the wind. Now I averted my gaze from the ugly view that confronted me and continued down.

Dad tried to convince us that the move would be an adventure. He'd given us *carte blanche* to buy whatever we wanted at furniture shops, after our disastrous attempts in transplanting our old furniture: the delicate wrought iron pieces and white wood furniture that looked so perfect and quaint in our brick cottage but had looked wonky and cheap against the multi-coloured feature walls.

'It's no good.' Mum had covered her face with her hand. 'This McMansion defies good taste,' she'd said, her tone full of spite. She'd never been enamoured with the charms of our new home, but she'd been worn down from leaving her family behind and fallen prey to Dad's enthusiasm for space.

Mum had wanted to pack our old furniture in storage, but Dad said we couldn't afford the fees, so we'd sold them at a garage sale. I thought I'd had bad days until then. Among the contenders for the title was the day that I found out about his other daughter, and the day that we moved to Melbourne and I was confronted with the monstrosity that was to be our new home.

'It's got four bedrooms so you don't have to share anymore,' he'd sounded like the eager real estate agent when he showed us around the McMansion.

'But I want to be with Alma.' Sanela grabbed hold of my skirt and tried to burrow into my body.

Even though sometimes I had wished for nothing more than my room, there were too many changes too soon. I wanted things to slow down, but life was fast forwarding at super speed.

'You're big enough to sleep by yourself,' Dad replied to Sanela off-handedly and continued the tour.

But in the end the winner of the *Worst day of my life* was the day of the garage sale when Dad sold every trace of our former life to strangers for pocket-change. As each piece of furniture was sold to an eager bargain hunter, I felt like I was being robbed of a childhood memory.

When we hit the bottom of the stairs, the front door burst open and Mum rushed in.

'Mummy,' Sanela exclaimed with pleasure, holding out her arms.

'*Srce moje.*' Mum picked her up, their dark, glossy hair intermingling together as she kissed her, calling Sanela her heart.

'Let's go.' Dad headed for the front door, briefcase in hand.

Our parents insisted we speak only Bosnian in the house so we maintained our fluency. Mum was much stricter about the rule and ignored us if we spoke English.

Sanela's stomach rumbled.

'Did you eat breakfast?' Mum looked at the clean sink and pushed past Dad. 'Let's fix that,' she said as she rifled through the kitchen cupboards. 'Sit.' Mum pointed to the stool with the wooden spoon she was holding.

As I watched Mum expertly flip eggs and put bread in the toaster, my father's burning gaze drilled a hole in the nape of my neck. Usually I was the one who made breakfast when Mum worked, but this morning I'd spent half an hour changing outfits.

'I'm going to be late,' Dad said, still standing by the doorway.

'Alma, your father will drive you,' Mum told me.

I coughed as the orange juice I was drinking went down the wrong pipe. I'd avoided being alone with Dad since I was expelled from my last school.

'And I'll drive Ali and Sanela,' Mum continued.

My new high school was in St Albans near Dad's medical centre, while Ali and Sanela's schools were closer to home in Sydenham.

When Mum served breakfast, I gulped the eggs down without chewing, only to stop abruptly and cover my mouth as the gooey texture of the scrambled eggs triggered my gag reflex.

'Don't rush.' Mum shot an annoyed look at Dad. He retreated to the living room.

When we finished breakfast, Mum pulled out our lunch bags from the fridge and handed them out. We walked out of the front door and I followed my siblings to Mum's 4WD. Ali got in the backseat and rolled down the window.

'Come on Alma.' Sanela tugged me toward the backseat.

'Alma isn't coming with us,' Mum said gently. 'Daddy will drive her to school today.'



'But who's going to wait with me until school starts?' Sanela was on the verge of tears.

Sanela was in prep and was anxious by herself. I used to stay with her at her primary school until her friends arrived, then undertook the fifteen-minute walk to my previous school, a private all-girls school.

'You'll be all right.' I knelt in front of her and cupped her cheek. 'Your new friend Heidi will wait for you at school.'

Sanela hugged me, her little arms clinging to my neck. She was born when I was ten and I reckon I'd nearly changed almost as many of her nappies as Mum had.

'Let go of your sister now.' Mum grabbed hold of Sanela's arms and gently tugged her away.

'Nooooo,' Sanela shouted, holding tighter.

I took a deep breath and blinked back my own tears. 'You won't be alone.'

'I'll stay with you,' Ali said.

'See.' I made my voice upbeat. 'Ali will stay with you.'

Sanela looked uncertainly between Ali and I. 'Promise,' she demanded from our brother.

'I promise.' He took Sanela's other hand.

'You'll be fine,' Mum said to me with a fake smile stretching her lips, while Ali strapped Sanela into the booster seat. 'You'll make lots of friends.'

As Mum hugged me, I hid my face in her hair, wanting to be a little girl once again and believe in every platitude, but I knew she was just as nervous as I was. I was embarking on a whole new adventure at my first co-ed public high school. Either of those would have terrified me. The two together and I was paralysed.

'Don't forget I'll pick you up after school at Dad's work.' Mum pecked me on the cheek and briskly got in the driver's seat.

I waved as the car reversed out of the driveway. The 4WD was parallel to the house and Sanela's pressed her face against

the glass window when Dad turned on the ignition to his car. I aborted my waving and jumped into the passenger seat.

We reached the end of the cul-de-sac and Mum's 4WD turned left, while Dad turned right. I watched through the back window until Mum's car wasn't visible anymore.

I looked ahead again, suddenly aware of the silence in the car. The last time I'd been alone with Dad was when I got expelled three days ago and he drove me home, his body taut with seething silence.

Dad took a right turn and cleared his throat. 'There's something I need to talk to you about,' he said, switching to English. He'd lived in Australia for nearly twenty years and had the faintest tinge of an accent when he spoke.

I turned to look at him and clenched my fists. He was going to give me the blasting I'd been waiting for. It was almost a relief after the silent treatment of the past three days. I grabbed hold of the car door handle and fantasised about pulling it open, throwing myself out of the moving car and sliding across the asphalt, my skin peeling like a banana. Surely it couldn't be more painful than what was about to take place in the car.

'It's about your new school.' Dad paused.

I took a deep breath, realising I hadn't exhaled since he first spoke.

'I'm really excited,' I lied. I was full of trepidation about what it would be like to go to a public school. The kids in public schools were rough, and I was told that public schools had less discipline. 'It's got a fantastic academic record.' I recited the facts and figures I'd memorised from repeatedly staring at the school enrolment information.

'It's not that.' Dad waved for me to stop. 'You'll know someone at your new school.'

'Mum told me,' I interrupted again. Mum worked the phones after they enrolled me, calling around the Bosnian community until she tracked down a student who went to the same school. 'Dina Hasanagić.'

'Could you please let me finish?' he snapped.

I hunched into the passenger seat, his words like a slap to the face. My fingers jumped to my mouth, my teeth connecting with enamel, before I remembered myself and sat on my hands.

'I'm sorry.' Dad put his hand through his hair, messing his carefully combed hair.

He was nervous. My stomach clenched harder.

'Your sister goes to St Albans High.' Dad turned to look at me.

'No, she doesn't,' I automatically replied. 'Sanela goes to—'

I abruptly cut out. He was talking about his other daughter. My body lurched as if our car hit a pothole, but the road before us was smooth as glass. It was the same feeling I'd had when I found out about our supposed sister from Dad's first marriage.

After my parents made the family announcement about my father's other daughter, everything sped up. Dad went on a trip to meet his first-born and came back with a job offer and real estate pamphlets in tow. My parents fought over the proposed move. Mum didn't want to leave her extended family who were all within a fifteen minute drive, but in the end it was inevitable. Dad had always wanted to move to Melbourne in order to be more involved with the Bosnian community and have access to greater professional opportunities, and when he found out he had a long-lost daughter, he gained greater familial priority.

Before I knew it we were packing and moving to Melbourne. Dad's attempt to atone for his inadvertent years of neglect were thwarted when Sabiha refused to have contact with him. I wanted to ask him if he knew before they enrolled me. I wanted to shout and scream, but years of habit taught me to keep my lips zipped and my eyes on the floor.

'I know you're probably thinking that I wanted you to enrol at St Albans High because of Sabiha, but that's not true,' he said, as if he'd read my mind. 'It truly is the best school in the area.' Dad peeked at me as he drove. 'I'm sorry. I know this isn't fair to

you. If you want to come to work with me, we can find another school for you.'

It was the last thing I expected to hear. 'Do you mean it?'

'Of course,' Dad said. 'It's completely your decision.'

He was tense, his whole body on edge as he waited for my answer. For the first time since we found out about the other daughter, I had his full attention and it was intoxicating. Maybe I shouldn't throw this gift away? Going to St Albans High might be my chance to bring back the Dad I knew, but who'd been missing in action for the past three months.

'What about Mum?' I asked.

'I didn't tell your mother because I didn't want any outside influences to affect your decision,' Dad said.

Anytime there was a reference to the other daughter, Mum stiffened and went on the defensive. She'd fought against the move and lost, and was furious that Sabiha refused to see Dad after our sacrifices.

'I'll tell your mother tonight.'

'But—' I was betraying Mum by even contemplating going behind her back.

'Sabiha is a part of my life now and your mother knows that. She'll see that this is the best decision for all of us.' Dad smiled.

I felt compelled to smile back, even though I didn't agree. There would be hell to pay when Mum found out. Dad stopped the car in front of the school and I looked with concern at the empty schoolyard.

'We're late,' Dad said as he got out of the car.

We were supposed to arrive at the office before the bell, see the coordinator, who would introduce me to Dina, whose job was to show me around the school and take me to class.

Dad reached into the backseat and got out a gift bag. 'I got this for your first day.'

I had a spring in my step as I peered into the bag. He'd bought me a purple organiser, matching pen and water bottle.

When we reached reception, Dad gave me a rushed hug and a peck on the cheek. I closed my eyes, inhaling Dad's cologne, and tried to remember the last time he'd held me. It was way back before we moved to Melbourne.

'Give your sister a chance,' he said before he left.

An admin worker walked me to class and introduced me to the teacher, while the students inside the classroom erupted into chatter.

'Everyone, settle,' Ms Partridge called out as I followed her back into class. 'This is our new student Alma Omerović.' Ms Partridge's forehead wrinkled for a moment and she looked at the back. 'Are you any relation to Sabiha?' she asked.

Time stopped as I followed Ms Partridge's gaze and met Sabiha's eyes. I felt *déjà vu*, as if I was looking at myself in a mirror. We both took after Dad and had his blonde hair, dimpled chin, and high cheekbones. But the longer I stared, the more the differences became apparent. We had different shaped eyes and mouth.

I'd wondered what Sabiha looked like, but at home she was a conversational black hole and I'd had to make do with my imagination. My fantasy revolved around Dad realising he'd made a mistake and casting off his fake daughter. Our lives would return to normal, and we'd go home to Hobart.

There were so many times I wanted to ask Dad if he got a DNA test, how could he be sure, but the questions burnt in my throat, never to pass my lips. Now I knew why he was so determined to establish a relationship with her. There was no mistaking that she was her father's daughter.

'No,' Sabiha spat out, breaking the spell. 'We're not related.'

I had to fight not to run for the door. She looked at me with such anger and disgust; I was scared she'd vaporise me with the scorn shooting from her eyeballs.

'You can sit next to Dina,' Ms Partridge continued, oblivious to the tension in the air.

Sabiha stood and collected her things, her resentment obvious as she slammed her notebook and slapped her pencil case together. She looked like a girl lumberjack; she had on a denim mini and pink leggings, and her feet encased in chunky worker boots. Her outfit should have looked all wrong, instead she looked cool and fierce. I was frumpy in my too-new jeans and bland top and couldn't wait to hide behind the desk.

'Sabiha, quiet.' The teacher shushed.

Sabiha moved to an empty desk in the last row. The two boys in front of her turned around and whispered to her, but she shook her head.

I slid into the seat next to Dina. 'Hi,' I whispered, trying to make eye contact, but Dina snubbed me.

I stared at the teacher stiffly, trying to focus on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it was no good. I felt Sabiha's stare like ants walking on my neck. Abruptly, I turned to look behind me, catching Sabiha off guard. I'd expected her to still be staring at me with rage. Instead she looked miserable. I remembered how Dad had implored me to give Sabiha a chance, as if I was his last hope.

Sabiha had determinedly rebuffed his every attempt to establish contact. In the end, their relationship was reduced to him paying weekly child support, a too generous amount that we could barely afford, according to Mum.

After English double period, the recess bell rang, and I turned to catch Sabiha madly packing her things to make a dash for the door.

'Can we talk?' I followed her.

'About what?' Sabiha whirled around. 'How your mother is a home wrecker?'

'No,' I stuttered to a stop, my train of thought evaporating. 'My Mum isn't—'

'Then how do you explain the fact that we're the same age?' Sabiha snapped, turning around again.