**A Thousand Splendid Suns Synopsis**

Warning! Spoilers ahead!

**ACT ONE**

Kabul, Afghanistan, 1992: as a family prepares to leave their war-ravaged home for Peshawar, in neighbouring Pakistan, a sudden explosion destroys their home. Only fourteen-year-old Laila survives the blast. As she regains consciousness, she sees her neighbour, a woman named Mariam, who explains that her husband, Rasheed, dug Laila out of the rubble. Mariam and Rasheed take in Laila, and help to nurse her back to health. Laila asks them to contact Tariq, a longtime friend, who had set out for Peshawar. In a dream, Laila speaks with Tariq, appearing as a young boy, with one prosthetic leg; their bond is a deep one, possibly with romantic feelings. Speaking privately, Mariam urges her husband to try to locate Tariq, but Rasheed insists that “he’s a cripple [who] can’t even take care of himself.” He says vaguely that he will “do what’s best” for Laila. Later, a man, Abdul Sharif, comes to tell Laila that Tariq has died. Laila is devastated. Mariam realizes that Rasheed plans to ask Laila to become his second wife, and pleads with him not to do it. But he is resolute in his plan—and Laila has no choice but to accept his proposal. Soon after marrying Rasheed, Laila announces that she is pregnant. Rasheed desperately hopes that it will be a boy. When Laila instead gives birth to a girl, Aziza, Rasheed proves a disinterested and unloving father, referring to her as “that thing.” He persistently questions Laila about her relationship with Tariq. Laila—who continues to meet with Tariq in her dreams—insists that they were just friends, but this does not quell Rasheed’s lingering suspicion.

Throughout this period, Mariam expresses her bitterness and resentment toward the younger, more attractive Laila. But as Rasheed begins to treat Laila badly—much the way he has long treated Mariam—Mariam becomes more sympathetic toward Laila, and shows herself to be a loving caretaker for Aziza. Mariam confides in Laila, telling her about her tragic childhood experience, presented in flashback: Mariam’s mother, a poor servant for a wealthy businessman (with whom she conceived Mariam, out of wedlock), had committed suicide. Her father then married her off to Rasheed, in order to keep her away from his wives and legitimate children. After this, the bond between Laila and Mariam grows and deepens, as Rasheed becomes increasingly cruel and the conditions in Kabul worsen by the day. One night, after Rasheed nearly kills Mariam, Laila convinces Mariam to leave.

**ACT TWO**

Mariam, Laila, and Aziza sneak out to the train station. As females are forbidden from travelling alone, they attempt to convince a man, Wakil, to act as their companion. Wakil seems willing to help them, but then turns them in to the authorities, who, after antagonistically questioning Laila and Mariam, return the women to a violently angry Rasheed. Years pass: Aziza, now 9, develops into a smart and inquisitive child; Laila is again pregnant; and the Taliban government has instituted severe new laws, barring females from virtually all aspects of public life. Laila gives birth to her second child, a boy, Zalmai. Again, years pass: Rasheed is affectionate toward Zalmai, now 5, providing him ample food and even toys despite the dire living conditions in Kabul—but he is cold and resentful toward Aziza, who is visibly starving, and both of his wives. He informs them that he lost his job, and has decided to send Aziza to live in an orphanage because he can no longer afford to take care of her. Heartbroken, Laila and Mariam help Aziza move to the orphanage, telling her that it is a “special school.” The operator of the orphanage, Zaman, is a kind man, who detests the Taliban; he assures Laila that he will teach Aziza, “covertly, of course.” In the weeks that follows, Laila returns repeatedly to visit Aziza, each time suffering beatings from Taliban authorities for venturing out without a male companion. One day, Laila returns home and finds Tariq standing outside her house. He explains that he was in prison for a time, but now lives peacefully in a rural area in Pakistan. Laila realizes that Rasheed must have bribed Abdul Sharif to tell her that Tariq had died. She tells Tariq that the reason she married Rasheed was that she was pregnant with Tariq’s child (Aziza). She asks him to return tomorrow. Later, Rasheed confronts Laila about this meeting, and says that he always secretly knew the truth about her first pregnancy. Rasheed attacks Laila. When it seems as if he is going to kill her, Mariam grabs a shovel and hits him over the head, killing him. Mariam tells Laila to leave Kabul with Tariq, Aziza, and Zalmai. She says that she is going to turn herself in to the authorities, so that they don’t hunt down Laila and her children. Laila pleads with Mariam to leave with her, but Mariam has made up her mind. She confesses, and is executed by a Taliban officer.

In an epilogue, Laila, Tariq, Aziza, and Zalmai visit the visit the area where Mariam was raised, an idyllic pastoral setting, and locate the *kolba*(small hut) where she lived with her mother. Laila is again pregnant, and suggests that if the baby is a girl she will name her Mariam. Laila leaves flowers on the ground outside the *kolba*, and the refugee family departs, its destination and future uncertain.

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