



Absent: A Novel

Betool Khedairi

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Dalal is a young woman living in a crowded Baghdad apartment with the childless aunt and uncle who raised her. In the same building, Umm Mazin, a fortune-teller, offers her customers cures for their physical and romantic ailments, Saad the hairdresser attends to a dwindling number of female customers, and Ilham, a nurse, escapes the stark realities of her hospital job in dreams of her long-lost French mother. Despite the damaging effects of bombings and international sanctions on their world, all the residents try to maintain normal lives.

Hoping to bring in much-needed cash by selling honey, Dalal's uncle becomes a beekeeper, enlisting Dalal's help in the care of these temperamental creatures. Meanwhile, Dalal falls in love for the first time—against a background of surprise arrests, personal betrayals, and a crumbling social fabric that turns neighbors into informants.

Tightly crafted and full of vivid, unforgettable characters, *Absent* is a haunting portrait of life under restrictions, the fragile emotional ties among family and friends, and the resilience of the human spirit.

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