

Mehri opened her eyes. She was lying on a mound of carpets. “Does he look like his father?” she asked.

The old man, Karimi, was holding the baby. “She doesn’t know?” he whispered, turning to his wife.

“She feels it,” Fariba said, glancing at Mehri. Fariba was much younger than her husband, and she was Mehri’s one friend.

“I can tell she doesn’t know,” Karimi insisted.

“Keep quiet. Are you massaging the baby like I showed you?”

“Yes, yes.” He rubbed the baby’s chest and back.

“What have we got ourselves into?” Fariba said. “Keep rubbing.” She grabbed a chunk of meat from the cooler and put it in a frying pan. “It’s for the mother. Not for you,” she said to her husband. She glanced back at Mehri. “She ruined her life the moment she laid eyes on that man. I told her to work for you, here at the bakery, instead. But she said she’d rather be his wife. Now look what’s happened.”

After a minute, Karimi asked, “Wife, why doesn’t the baby make a sound?”

“Because her eyes are blue,” Fariba said. “And she’s cursed, like her mother.”

MEHRI HAD STAYED motionless under a blanket for hours, her back against the wall. She was ashamed to look at her friend.

“I warned you about marrying him, didn’t I?” Fariba said. “How many times did I say he’d beat you?” At last, Fariba wrapped the baby, pressed her against her own breast, and approached Mehri. “Don’t you want to hold her?” she asked.

Mehri said nothing.

“You can’t pretend she doesn’t exist. Yes, she’s a girl. But it’s not so bad.”

“He’s going to kill me,” Mehri said.

Karimi was leaning against the wall, too, his face hidden behind his paper. But his hands trembled. They ached from helping Mehri give birth. And now he was embarrassed to look at her.

“You know, husband, if we had a radio, you wouldn’t need to read the paper. You can barely hold it up,” Fariba said to him. “They say there are so many things to hear on the radio. Little plays. Would be nice to hear one of those.” She turned away from Mehri and lit a match to the coal in the stove.

Karimi pushed his reading glasses to the tip of his nose and folded the paper. “Nonsense,” he said. “You worry about your little radio when most of those northerners are showing off their televisions. And all those years ago I taught myself to read—so why shouldn’t I read the paper? Nobody else back then knew how to read. Not my mother, not my father. I was the only kid up and down these streets who could do it. Figured out the letters on my own, and you—”

“What’s a television?” Mehri asked suddenly, looking up. She caught a glimpse of the baby’s hair under the light. It was a reddish brown, like the father’s.

“A movie screen, only smaller,” Karimi said, without looking

up. "It's small enough to fit in a room. They have them all over the North-City. Mossadegh was on one the other day."

"Why was our prime minister on television?"

"To show he was alive. Somebody tried to kill him. Probably the filthy British." Karimi turned back to his paper. "Damn them all. If it isn't the communists, it's the English, and if it isn't the English, it's those darned turban lovers thinking they're as good as God. If it isn't—"

Fariba slammed down the kettle. "This poor girl nearly died tonight, and you worry about your politicians?"

"None of your scolding in front of her," Karimi said. "And dammit, nobody loves this country anymore. Except *him*. Mossadegh is great. Great, I'm telling you!"

Mehri closed her eyes again and pretended to sleep.

"This is a woman's matter," Karimi added, more softly, nodding at Mehri. "You want the neighbours to talk? We can't keep her here."

"That's all right, Mr. Karimi," said Fariba, "you just sit right there and drink your tea and read your paper. Just think about what your great Mr. Mossadegh would think of you."

FOR THE NEXT two days, Mehri refused to hold the baby, even when the father, Amir, kicked at the door of Karimi's bakery downstairs. Fariba hollered at Amir from the second-floor balcony that his son was no son, but very much a girl.

Amir said, "Then bring her down so I can kill her."

"You need to name her," Fariba said, turning to Mehri. "Now."

But by the end of the day, the infant was still nameless. And Amir still sat at the door, waiting to kill the child.

"He barks at people when they walk into the bakery," Fariba said. She bounced the baby in her arms. "I had to feed her dry milk,

you know. Not good for her.” Fariba shifted her weight where she sat on the Persian rugs covering the floor. She gulped down the last of her gin from a tea glass. When she was finished, she slapped the glass on the rug. “There’s always your brother.”

“He won’t help,” Mehri said.

“You’ve always said that, but you don’t know. And that boy Amir would rather kill his daughter than pay for her. Got anybody besides your brother?”

“No.”

Karimi entered the room and sat beside his wife. “You still unwell, child?” he asked Mehri. His voice was kind but weary. He had known Mehri since she was thirteen, a younger friend of Fariba’s, who was five years older. He could hardly bear to see her pain.

Mehri covered herself with her veil and cast down her eyes. She bit into a soft corner of the material. It hadn’t been washed for weeks. Sometimes when she walked the streets she wondered if others could smell her.

Fariba unfolded her thick legs and stood up, the baby in her arms.

“Wife,” Karimi said, rising as well. “Put the baby down and come here.”

They whispered as they walked into the next room. Mehri could hear them—only pieces and bits, but enough.

“I can’t do it,” she heard Karimi say.

“Are you ready to pay their way?” Fariba said.

“This is my house. Don’t you forget where your place is, woman!”

“She’s my friend. I do what I want with my friends. And I know that girl. She’s lying about her brother.”

“The government won’t do anything for a family like that,” Karimi said.

“That’s their people’s burden, then,” Fariba said. “I don’t know what to tell you, husband. If it weren’t for the laws—”

“Other than the laws, what do we do about *him*?”

“Him, we’ll figure out later. I’ll cut off his orange-haired head if I have to.”

THE BAKER AND his wife were still talking when Mehri picked up the baby and stepped out through the back door. In the snow, she loosened her veil and pulled out her hard, blackened nipple. Her breast ached in the frozen air. She brought it to the baby’s lips, but the milk dripped away. She was cold, but the baby’s skin was even colder. Above, a cloud hid the moon. A veil of snow had begun to cover the city. She felt wet blood dripping down her legs. It made a trail behind her. Amir could find her if he followed it, like a lone wolf trailing its prey.

But Mehri knew how to outmanoeuvre him. As a beggar-child she had made her way in Tehran’s northern streets, where the rich lived, and where some of them had given her something to eat. Most days she had received nothing, unlike her brother. But he was the boy.

When she reached Pahlavi Street, which connected the south to the north and divided worlds and existences, she found it changed from what she remembered: almost empty, almost silent, its ghosts were speaking and its rich were long asleep. By the light of the street lamps, she could see the snowy roads that rose to the tips of the Alborz Mountains, twenty kilometres away. As a child, she had dreamed of reaching those mountains. She would open her arms and fly to them, just like the phoenix in the old tales. She used to wonder if, from up there, one could see the city’s secrets. Once past the city’s valleys, did the mountain people breathe more freely? She would imagine the rich on their picnics along the mountain’s slopes and beside its rivers.

After three hours of walking, she was somewhere in the city centre. Her legs shook. They ached and ached and ached to the beat of war drums, her muscles pounding against bone. Her entire body ached. Her sex ached most. She wondered what would happen if the baby fell from her arms. Would it freeze and become a message to the future world: beware of birth, beware of life, beware if you arrive and are unwanted? If the baby fell, would its skull explode? Would all its bones break? Or, just like it had done in birth, would the child overpower everything around her and force her body into the world?

As Mehri walked, the city revealed itself to her. Structures and freeways unfolded and laid bare the world of the privileged. Here, in the city centre, the buildings grew taller; seen this close, they were as vast as the mountains that framed them. On one side of the street stood the tallest building she had ever seen. There was a picture of an old man on it: the prime minister, Mossadegh. She recognized him. Everyone knew his face now. She looked at it for a while, then carried on, past the parked cars and the few vehicles driving gently through the night. Even the shapes of cars had changed since last she had been here, she thought. They were more streamlined now, and in colours she hadn't seen before.

Now the streets and sidewalks widened. Mehri's toes hurt from the cold. The baby was oddly silent, as if she knew what her mother was about to do. Mehri touched her sore thighs, shuffling her hand past and through the veil's three layers, one for piety, one for culture, and the third for warmth. She picked up a handful of snow, cupped it under her veil to where she had been torn open and tried to wash the stain off, but the cold only stung her more. Blood stained her fingers. She put her nipple into the baby's mouth again, but the baby still wouldn't drink.

She walked another hour before reaching the centre of a major

intersection. At the edge of the street, strands of grass tried to push through the snow. Mehri looked around. Everything was new here, everything was modern.

From this cross street there were four directions in which to go. She could walk back south, go north, or stay here on the streets that led east and west. To the west, there it was again—the picture of the old man, this time on newspaper pages glued to brick walls. Eastward the street was narrower, flanked by small trees that had lost their leaves for winter. One was different. It was a mulberry tree, which she recognized from her childhood, having spent hours picking fruit from one with her brother. They would collect thousands of mulberries in tin cans and leave them to dry and turn sweet before selling them. By nightfall they would have enough money for food—perhaps some meat to keep their muscles working.

Mehri had never imagined herself becoming a mother. Life had never seemed as if it could last that long. But now life had sped toward her, crashed into her, developed in her organs, between her muscles and veins, month after month, and then exploded out of her in the form of the being she now held in her arms. She wanted badly to bring the baby closer, even to kiss her. Instead, she touched her hand to the bark of the mulberry tree and felt its grooves. The baby whimpered for the first time, as though in protest, as though begging for some mercy.

Mehri walked on. She saw another mulberry tree, and beside it, an open alleyway. From within the alley came a stench of waste. She covered her face with her veil and entered. Paper garbage bags had been left out on either side. Holding the baby in one arm, she walked between the rows, searching for the right place. She felt nothing and had no awareness of time. The baby hardly stirred as Mehri placed her on the ground. For several minutes, neither mother nor child moved. Moonlight shone on the infant's face, and

for the first time Mehri looked clear into her eyes. She and her baby shared the same eye colour, as Fariba had said. She bent down and caressed the baby's cheeks, her chin and brow. In the moonlight she saw that blood from her fingers had stained the baby's face. But there was nothing she could do about that now.

At last, Mehri stood and turned around. She walked away—so far that not even the moonlight could help her see her daughter again.



TRUCKS RUMBLED ALONG the gravel road in the dead of the night, vibrating like a line of ants, thick tarpaulins shaking as engines whirred and wheels lifted dust, fogging the cold February air. Behrouz Bakhtiar closed his eyes. A film of dirt coated the skin covering the thin bones of his face. He watched by moonlight as four eight-wheelers filled with young men from the provinces rolled away.

He would not be driving the young men home as usual. This was the first night of his four days off. He would instead place a cigarette in his mouth, light it with the last match he had in his pocket, and walk home down the red mountain, where earth mingled with snow, then stride through the city from north to south. This was his Tehran, and he was its secret guardian, the angel perched on the mountaintop counting buildings, trees, lights, and people who walked about like insects, unaware of being watched.

Strange how people are, Behrouz thought, the cigarette between his thin lips. And he began his walk down and through the city just as he had planned, just as he had been anticipating all day.

He slid down the slopes effortlessly, taking a drag from his cigarette every once in a while. He whistled when the mood struck him. He had walked this path many times, since he had first learned

to drive up the mountain. How old had he been, seventeen? He was thirty-three now, so that made it sixteen years. With time off multiplied by sixteen, that made about four thousand times he had walked up and down the slopes of Darakeh.

Sometimes, of course, the generals gave him permission to drive down and save himself the three-hour walk. And when Behrouz first got married, the general in command had not only encouraged him to drive, he'd let him off early to encourage husbandly duties—but not without reminding Behrouz how old his new wife was. “Think that wife of yours’ll be able to handle fresh little you?” the general had said.

Behrouz had married Zahra when he was nineteen, upon his father’s urging. “The Prophet was a boy, his wife was forty when he took her,” his father had said. But Zahra was no prophet’s wife. She was thirty-six, had never married, and had a son, Ahmad, who was the same age as Behrouz. Ahmad hadn’t come to the wedding. That night, when Behrouz asked his new wife where her son was, Zahra replied, “Somewhere in the prison halls.” Then she had forced herself on him.

When he’d first started driving trucks in the army, Behrouz had been more talkative. The soldiers liked him. They would reveal themselves, telling him about their lives on the farms or in small towns. If they were Tehrani boys, they talked about their schools and their girlfriends. The only one who had never opened up was a member of the royal family—a cousin of the king. But Behrouz supposed that was different. He had been ordered not to look the boy in the eyes.

Behrouz had begun learning to drive at sixteen because he wasn’t strong enough to fight, or smart enough to read. His father had taught him the basics. He could have sold bread on the streets like his father, or worked the oil mines like his uncles. But the one

time he had suggested this, his father slapped him so hard, Behrouz saw stars for days. And that was the end of that.

Now, as he walked, the red dirt beneath his boots remained frozen. Three nights ago there had been a storm. But now the snow had settled and was packed along the path. The walk wasn't as bad as he'd expected. He swiftly made it down Darakeh, to the northern tip of Pahlavi Street. Here there were cobblestone roads and the houses were old. He'd heard that the king's father once lived here.

He walked past the old car parked along the street, searching his pocket in vain for another smoke. A man was walking toward him.

"Could I trouble you for a cigarette?" Behrouz asked. He had learned how to speak politely, like the people did up here. The man pulled out a single smoke from his pack. Behrouz took it and placed it between his lips. The man held out a lighter, its flame flickering in the slight breeze.

"Thank you," Behrouz said, and began to walk away.

"No money?" the man said.

Behrouz waited.

"No money?" the man asked again.

"You want money for the light?" Behrouz said.

"What do you think?"

Behrouz searched both pockets awkwardly.

"Only kidding. Stupid man." The man laughed as he walked away.

Behrouz stepped up his pace and cut through alleyways. He knew he was somewhere in Youssef-Abad district, midway through the city. He normally walked the main street, but tonight he felt like a change. Streams of sewer water ran in the gutters, but blossoming mulberry trees flanked the roads. This district was one of

his favourites. He liked the corner shops and the cinema and cafés, which were old but patronized by rich people.

He was staring at the letters on the front of the cinema when he heard the cry—like a cat in pain. He walked closer to where he thought the sound was coming from, but water gurgling in the gutter muffled its location. He crossed into another alley—nothing there. He continued to move from alley to alley, jumping over gutters. The more he found nothing, the more urgently he searched. His only help was the moon; there were no lights in the nearby homes; it seemed the rest of the world was asleep.

He finally reached the mulberry tree, which was flanked by rows of garbage. Staring up at him was a pack of wild dogs. He imagined them tearing the tiny creature who had made the sound limb from limb.

He grabbed a stick from the ground and charged. But none of the dogs moved. How long had they been there? As he neared, the dogs sat and watched quietly. At last, Behrouz bent down and lifted the baby into his arms. The dogs sniffed his feet, turned and left.

He sped toward the edge of town, past abandoned buildings in which the poor secretly lived, past stacks of cardboard where the even poorer slept. He wondered how long the child had gone without food. The stores were still closed, but his wife must have bought some milk, he thought frantically.

The baby didn't look more than three days old. His head hurt. The stars whirled in the sky. At last, not far in the distance, he saw the pale outline of his house.

FOR THREE HOURS, Behrouz sat in his living room, trying to feed the child. He had woken a sleeping neighbour, who had found some milk, though the baby threw up most of it. Now, once again, he dipped the cap of his fountain pen into the bowl of milk beside

him on the floor. He held the tiny vessel to the baby's lips, careful not to tilt it too far. The milk flowed onto her lips, but only a few drops got in. He wiped her face clean with the back of his pinky finger. In a minute, he would try again.

Zahra was sleeping. Her son, Ahmad, out of jail only two days, had left his dirty boots on the kitchen table. He'd landed in prison for cutting someone's fingers off, and Behrouz knew he would already be back to stealing.

By morning, Behrouz was struggling to keep his eyes open. From the north-facing window, he watched the rising sun. The rays crept toward him, along the floor. In the bedroom, his wife still slept soundly. He got up, walked into her room, and stood at her bedside, the baby to his chest. Zahra lay tightly wrapped in her blankets. She was fair-skinned, with straight, fine hair that turned a shade of light brown in summer. She liked to curl it these days, using little plastic rolls.

He returned to the living room and laid the baby gently on the floor. Then he walked quietly back to the bedroom.

"We have to talk," Behrouz whispered.

Zahra covered her eyes to block the sun. "You're home. Figured you'd be killing yourself with opium all night."

"Come with me." He pulled her out of bed.

In the living room, the baby's arms and legs shook and she struggled like an overturned insect.

"I think she's hungry," Behrouz said. "I gave her some milk, but she hardly drank. She needs to suck it, I think."

Zahra backed away from the infant. "Where did you find it? Is this some mess of yours we have to fix?" Her voice was sharp.

Behrouz picked up the baby. "Nothing like that," he said. "Last night in the alley, there was waste all around her. I found her in Youssef-Abad."

“That’s the North-City,” Zahra said. “What were you doing with those people? Listen to me: You put that baby where you found it so the trash who are her people can take it back.”

“There were dogs around her. I don’t know what they wanted, but—”

“Get it out of my house. And I know you do your own nasty business. You never touch me—as if I were made of fire and would burn you. But men are men. You must be touching somebody.” Zahra grabbed the baby’s face. “Did you take a look at its eyes? They’re blue. I swear on Imam Hossein you’ve brought a blue-eyed devil into my house.”

“Her eyes are green,” Behrouz said.

“No. There’s blue in them. You’ve brought evil into this house, Mr. Bakhtiar.”

Behrouz listened silently as Zahra walked away and into the bedroom, still shouting at him. Fourteen years with her and the rage had only worsened. He looked at the baby. Zahra was right. There was blue in those eyes. He couldn’t think how to comfort her. It had been so easy when he’d been a little boy and would play pretend. He would rock his baby, feed his baby, just like the neighbourhood girls did. And he’d been careful to never let his father know. But now, here was a real baby. The only thing he could think to do was speak to it, human to human. Not human to doll or master to slave. Yes, he would do what humans had always done, from the first crack of life.

“Want me to tell you a story?” he whispered to the little girl. Her wrinkled eyelids were shut tight, as if she would never want to face the world. “Want me to tell you the story of the Tooba Tree?” Behrouz said again. And so he began, hoping to drown out Zahra’s shouts. “Past the clouds and the sky, way up in heaven, there is a tree, the Tooba Tree, from whose roots spring milk, and honey, and wine.”

"I curse the day I married a boy," Zahra yelled from the other room.

Behrouz kept on: "Milk to nourish you, honey to sweeten you, wine to take you to the land of dreams."

Zahra yelled louder. "Think you were my saviour, Mr. Bakhtiar? You only made hell last longer."

Behrouz lifted the baby closer to his lips and whispered in her ear. "The Tooba Tree belongs to the orphans of heaven, for there is nothing that matters more, my little one."

He stopped and listened for Zahra again, but she had finished her rant. The baby had opened her eyes but was falling back asleep. "You sang to me from that alley," he whispered to her, "and I heard your song. Yet if I hadn't, and if you had not been saved, the Tooba Tree would have been waiting for you and you would have been all right just the same." Behrouz paused. He wondered if saving the little girl had been the right thing to do after all. But, since he had saved her and forced her into this thing called life, there was one more thing he needed to do.

"I used to love music, you know, when I was a little boy," he said, putting his pinky finger in the baby's mouth so she could suckle. "I used to sing, in secret, so my father wouldn't know. I used to sing arias. Know what they are? Little tales, cries in the night. If you sing an aria, the world will know all about you. It will know your dreams and secrets. Your pains and your loves."

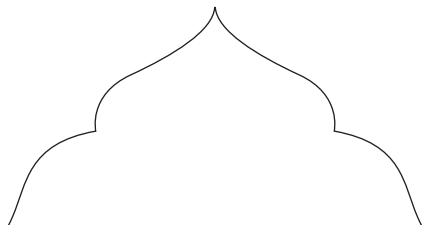
Behrouz heard Zahra throw a pillow against the bedroom wall, and paused. After a few moments, hearing nothing more, he kept on. "I'll name you Aria, after all the world's pains and all the world's loves," he said. "It will be as if you had never been abandoned. And when you open your mouth to speak, all the world will know you."



part one

ZAHRA

1958–59



1

The doll lay hidden under the dirt in the garden, part of its head exposed and facing her, as though it had been waiting for Aria to rescue it from the garden bed. Even from a distance, Aria could see that its eyes were the same colour as hers. She lay on her stomach and reached out an arm for it, but the doll was too far away. Aria was small for her age; any other five-year-old girl would have been able to reach the doll, she thought. She looked down at herself. The dress her father had given her last month had already turned grey. She was making it worse now, crawling through the dirt. She'd be in trouble.

One of the doll's eyelids was half closed, but it opened when Aria at last grasped and shook the wooden body. She winked back at it. Then she crawled back out of the dirt, holding the doll to her chest. She stood on her tiptoes and peeked in through the window that overlooked the garden. Zahra was inside somewhere, and if she found Aria like this, she would do mean things to her again.

Her father had been away for a week, working in the barracks and military camps. This meant Zahra would feed her only once a day, because a little girl like Aria deserved nothing more. Sometimes, Aria would swipe Zahra's food from the table when Zahra wasn't looking.

Aria skipped around the courtyard clutching the doll in her hand. She leapt over imaginary canyons that opened in the cracks of the cobblestones. When fire burst up to the rim of the canyons, she jumped high. Then she ran to the courtyard's fountain for a drink. The cement basin around the fountain was small, and she liked to play inside it on hot summer days. But the neighbours, who took turns washing their dishes in the basin, disapproved. And when Zahra had found out, she'd given Aria a few good beatings to set her straight. Today she had another mission: cleaning her new doll. She pretended her Bobo had got it for her. She didn't call him Baba the way other children did their fathers.

She knelt against the basin, removed the doll's dirty dress, and dipped it into the water. It soaked a good while as Aria ran her fingers through the doll's matted hair. When she was done, she wiped the doll clean with the front of her own dress, the least dirty part. Then she picked up the doll's dress. There were flower petals along the creases. She rubbed the fabric of the dress against itself like she'd seen Zahra do whenever she washed their clothes. Once the dress was clean, she clothed the doll and laid it carefully on the grass beneath the basin to dry. Then she lay down beside it and fell asleep. Under the sun, she dreamt of a woman who told her how lucky she'd been to find the doll, and that she should forget about hunger if she wanted to be a good warrior. She slept deeply and dreamed of other things, too, such as lions in the desert and nomads on the mountain.

When Zahra pulled her hair, Aria awoke, too shocked to cry. Zahra smacked Aria's face with the back of her hand, knowing that inflicted the most hurt. Blood dripped from a cut on Aria's cheek left by Zahra's wedding ring.

Across the courtyard, a neighbour, Mr. Jahanpour, watched from his balcony. He went inside, slamming the door behind him,

then came back out with a megaphone. “Madam . . . madam, please, this isn’t godly. I advise you not to—”

“Mind your own business, you shit of a man!” Zahra shouted.

Mr. Jahanpour tried again, the megaphone blasting his voice.

“Madam, all this is really not the right way to go about things.”

Zahra stopped her blows. “Listen, Mr. Saviour, she’s my shit of a daughter. I do what I want with her.”

“Madam, I told you last time to control your temper on the girl. She was only playing. I was watching.”

“So you’re as much a pervert as you are an idiot,” Zahra said.

“Put that thing away. Why have the whole neighbourhood hear you?”

Mr. Jahanpour stood silently as Zahra pulled Aria into the house, the little girl kicking at the air in protest. “Go to the balcony,” said Zahra, and shoved Aria there. “No breakfast, no lunch, nothing for you.”

“I don’t want to eat anything, anyway!” Aria shouted.

Zahra clicked the lock to the balcony door.

From where she was now, Aria could see Mr. Jahanpour in the courtyard, kneeling beside the garden where she’d been playing only moments before. His arms were behind his back and he was peering at the bed of reeds. Then he looked up at Aria’s apartment.

“We share this space, stupid woman,” he said. “It doesn’t belong only to you.”

He bent down and pulled out a reed, and now Aria could see that Mr. Jahanpour’s son stood behind him. The boy lingered around his father, then strolled over to the basin and the patch of grass where Aria had left her doll. He grabbed the doll and ran inside. His father followed.

“Tell him to give me my doll back,” Aria yelled after Mr. Jahanpour. But he did not answer.

IT WAS ALMOST dark when Aria awoke to the sound of a bang.

“Wake up!” an urgent voice said.

Aria rubbed her eyes. She pressed her head between the rails of the balcony.

“Who is that?” she asked. “I can’t see you.”

“Down here.”

A figure stepped under the moonlight. It was the neighbour’s boy.

“I live across from you,” he said. “That’s my mama in the kitchen.” He pointed to the apartment opposite Aria. Through the window, she could see a woman standing over a steaming pot.

“What do I care? Give me back my doll. I saw you take it.”

“I knew it was yours. I took it so I could give it back to you. I saw your mother smacking you. Did you hit her back? My Baba says that if he ever hits me like that I’m allowed to hit him back.”

“Give me my doll.”

“Wait. I need you to help me with something. See the big tree in front of you?”

The boy pointed to a tall cherry tree near the centre of the courtyard. Its branches had grown so long that they brushed against her balcony.

“What do you want with the tree?” Aria said.

“Can you reach the branches from where you are? My ball is stuck in there,” the boy said.

“No. First you give me my doll.”

“I can’t. I’d have to throw it up to you and I can’t throw that far. But my Baba says I’ll be real strong one day, just like him. Want to see my muscles?”

“I hate your muscles,” Aria replied. “And my Bobo’s strong, too.”

"What's a Bobo?"

"Like what you have, idiot," said Aria. "My father."

"Then why do you call him Bobo?"

Aria leaned over the balcony. "Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"Just shake the branches a little," the boy said. "The ball will fall."

"I can't talk to you. You'll get me in trouble."

"Listen, if you help me bring that ball down, I'll bring you a present after school tomorrow, *and* give you your doll."

"I don't need presents," Aria said.

The boy sat cross-legged on the ground and sulked. "I hate you," he shouted. "You're a stupid little girl."

"I'm big," Aria said. "I'm very, very big." When he didn't reply, she added, "I'm five years old. When it snows I turn six."

"Listen, will you please shake those branches? My neck hurts looking up and talking to you."

Aria moved closer to the balcony railing. "What's your name?" she asked.

"What's yours?" the boy asked.

"I asked you first," she said.

"Kamran."

"I've never heard that name before."

"You're only five years old. Give yourself some time."

"I'm Aria."

"Aria?" he laughed. "That's a boy's name."

"I am *not* a boy."

"Fine, you're not a boy. Are you going to help me?"

"Maybe." Peering down through the railing, Aria noticed something strange about this boy, about his face, his lips. "Did your father hit you?" she asked.

“No,” the boy said.

“Why are your lips smashed open. Did you fall?”

He seemed embarrassed. “That’s just my . . . It’s my . . . I was born with it. My mouth is kind of inside-out.”

“Inside-out? Can I call you inside-out-boy?”

“No, you cannot,” the boy said.

“Okay, I won’t. If you keep your promise about the present,” Aria said. She walked to where she could almost touch the branches, but they were still too far away to reach. “I can’t,” she shouted down.

“Stand on the base of the railing,” Kamran replied.

She did what he told her, stretching out as far as she could. “I got one!” she said.

“Shake it as hard as you can.”

She shook the branch and heard the sound of the ball bouncing on the ground. The boy grabbed it and ran off.

“Don’t forget about my doll, Mr. Kamran! Boy with the inside-out mouth and smashed lips!” she shouted into the darkness.



KAMRAN HELD HIS ball tight. He slid the metal door to his family’s apartment aside with his foot, ran up to his room, and hid the ball under his bed. On his way down, he stopped for a moment at the window where he had been watching the Bakhtiar girl for months now, ever since she had been allowed to play in the garden. He was upset she’d noticed his cleft lip. But then again, everyone eventually did. Thank goodness he’d had the idea of throwing the ball into the tree. It was the best way to meet her. And she wasn’t as strange as he had thought. She was a little nice, even. What was strange was her boy’s name. Aria. He knew what it meant. His father had told him once. The Iranian race. But only boys were ever named this.

In the kitchen, his mother was feeding his little sister, who was now two. He opened the icebox. There was nothing inside but bread.

“Don’t touch,” his mother said. “It’s dinner.”

Kamran sat at the table and watched his sister suckle at his mother’s breast.

“What were you doing with that girl?” his mother asked.

“Playing,” he said.

“She’s a bastard girl. Stay away from her.”

“She has a mother and a father,” Kamran said.

“Not real ones. She’s a throwaway girl. From the street. And her eyes are blue. That means the devil’s in her. Stay away or the jinn will come to your bed at night. Khanoom Kokab down the street took a stray in once. Everyone in her family died, even her cat. Now this girl’s got blue eyes. Even worse.”

“Her eyes are green,” said Kamran. “I think.”

“How can you see in the dark, son? Devil children are from jinn, and what do jinn do?”

“They trick us,” Kamran said.

“Good. So don’t be fooled. Everything she’ll ever tell you is a trick. Even the Prophet, peace be upon him, will swear to it.”

“Were there jinn in your town when you were little?” Kamran asked.

“In Yazd, all we ever had was dust, jinns, and Jews. And the fire temples, where the Zoroastrians do their hocus-pocus. Jinn, hocus-pocus; Jews, hocus-pocus; Zoroastrians, hocus-pocus. I bet with those blue eyes that girl’s a Jew or a jinn’s daughter.”

“Kids at school say jinn aren’t real. They’re made-up stories from the small towns.”

“Yazd is no small town. It was the capital of the world once. And if you don’t know that this land was made by jinn, then I don’t know what you’ve learned.”

His mother loosened her headscarf and Kamran eyed the rotten tooth in her mouth. The tooth beside it had already fallen out. When the rotten one falls, he thought, she'll look like the stupid women on the streets.

"Kids at school say if you drink milk your teeth get pretty," he said.

"Milk is for babies," she replied.

"Can Baba get milk for us tonight?" he asked.

"Read the time for me and tell me what it says." His mother held out the watch on her wrist.

"It's stopped," Kamran said. "You haven't wound it."

"I haven't wound it," she said.

He corrected himself. "Wound it. Anyway, you can't have a winding watch if you can't tell time."

His mother jangled the watch. It was loose on her. "It was a wedding gift from your father. Maybe you'll teach me to read time. That's what good boys do for their mothers, huh?"

Kamran heard footsteps at the door and turned around.

"Now go help Kazem," his mother said, turning back to his sister.

Kazem was Kamran's father. He used his mother's maiden name, Kazemi, but everyone in Yazd had called him Kazem since his childhood. When Kamran's mother had married him, the name stuck. But Kamran only called his father Kazem when he felt sorry for him.

Kazem was carrying two full bags. Kamran took them, put them on the floor, and began to empty the contents. In one bag were rags and two jars of milk. In the other, he found two loaves of bread and three rotten apples. "Is that all?" Kamran asked.

"For tonight." His father held up his hand to show Kamran's mother. A bloodied bandage was wrapped around it.

"Oh! What did you do, husband?"

Kazem sat on the sofa. Dust rose and made him cough. "Let's see what I did. Come here, son." He unwrapped the dressing, revealing a mangled finger, swollen and blue. He passed the wrapping to Kamran. "You see, son, what I did was stupid. The bricks are supposed to go on top of each other, but not exactly on top. Layered, see? One brick sticks at the centre of the two under it. Mortar in between, layer on, pop, stick the new brick on top, pop. Real fast: mortar, brick, mortar, brick. Go too fast, and here's your poor finger." He held it up and laughed at his son's terrified face. He ruffled Kamran's hair. When he laughed he wheezed because he smoked too much, and the dust from the bricks had entered his lungs. "It's all right," he said. "Everything heals."

"Can you work?" Kamran asked.

"Don't you worry," his father said. "And one of those jars right there is yours. You drink up. My pretty son's got to have pretty teeth."

He ruffled Kamran's hair again and walked to the kitchen. He kissed his daughter, who'd fallen asleep at her mother's breast. "The other jar's for you," he said to his wife. "No protests. Money will come. I'm going to bed."

"Your son was playing with that jinn girl tonight," Kamran's mother said.

"Stop it, Mama." Kamran turned to his father, pleading. "She gave me back my ball."

"We're sure she's a jinn, now?" Kazem said.

"She's a devil-bastard child that came off the street," his mother replied.

"Then I would be careful with that ball from now on, son. Who knows what spells she's put on it." Kazem laughed and winked, but Kamran couldn't tell if his father was joking, or if Aria was indeed a jinn's daughter.

2

The new fellow dipped his face into the bucket. Water sparkled against his dark skin and ran down his neck to hide beneath the thick cotton of his uniform. Behrouz thought he'd met all the new boys, but this one he had somehow missed. The boy dipped his head again and splashed water through his black hair. The regiment had just finished their afternoon run.

Behrouz stubbed out his cigarette and approached.

"Towel?" he asked. He threw one over without waiting for an answer.

"Thanks," the new fellow said. No one else had a towel. "Guess I'm the special one." He laughed.

"You've got a captain badge there." Behrouz lit another cigarette and offered it.

"Don't smoke. But thanks," the boy said.

"You're older than the rest of these guys. But still young for a captain." Behrouz took a drag of his cigarette. His heavy-lidded eyes narrowed as he breathed in. He scratched at the growing beard on his face and exhaled. "Name's Behrouz." He held out his hand.

"Rameen."

"Nice to meet you, Captain," said Behrouz.

Rameen laughed. "Don't call me that. Just Rameen. You the cook?"

Behrouz blew out more smoke. "Sometimes. Driver, mostly."

"Oh yes. I think you brought us up."

"I didn't see you in the back of the truck with the others."

"I came up with the generals," Rameen said. "By us, I meant my men. You don't look old enough to be a driver. Why don't we have you suiting up with the boys? Bet you could use a rifle just fine."

Behrouz shook his head. "Been driving a long time now. You up here for a while?"

"Long as they'll have me." Rameen wiped at his neck again. "Doing the mandatory time. I'll be out of here soon enough. I've got more important things to do."

Behrouz nodded.

"My tent's over there. Small one next to the big dorm." Rameen pointed to the top of a hillock where the dormitory tents were set up. "You ever get bored, come say hi." He smiled, revealing perfect teeth. He looked like a movie star.

"Got a fancy place already?" Behrouz said. "People will think you've done somebody a favour."

Rameen laughed again. "Not bad for twenty-two. And right out of college."

Behrouz said nothing. He put out his cigarette between his and Rameen's feet.

"Thanks for the towel," said Rameen, handing it back.

"Keep it. I'm off to make dinner." Behrouz patted his shoulder and walked away.

At dinner, he looked for Rameen but couldn't find him. When most of the men had returned to their bunks, he filled a plate with rice and eggplant stew. In the dark, he found Rameen's tent.

"Captain?" he said quietly. It was cold, and his hands shook and he spilled some of the stew. He heard the rustling of papers and the closing of a drawer.

"Be right there," Rameen called. A moment later he unzipped the tent's opening. His face was sweaty.

Behrouz pulled back the flap. "For you," he said.

"Come in," Rameen replied. "Bet it tastes better with your cigarette smoke all over it."

"Sorry." Behrouz flicked the butt outside.

"Only kidding. Really. This is too kind."

"Seemed like you didn't have time to make it to dinner, so I thought . . ."

"Much too kind," Rameen repeated. "Have a seat." He motioned to the tightly made bed at the head of the tent, but Behrouz chose a nearby chair. Rameen sat on the bed with the plate in his lap. Soon, however, he set it down, walked back to his desk drawer, opened and shut it again.

Behrouz smiled.

"It's nothing," said Rameen. "I just don't want things falling out. You made this?" He took a whiff of the stew.

Behrouz nodded.

"Excellent. Excellent," Rameen said. But he stared at his plate, and Behrouz wondered why he was so scared.

IN THE MORNING, Behrouz looked again for Rameen. But he didn't see him then or all day, and that night he skipped dinner. He returned to the tent he shared with five other men, lay on his bed, grabbed the book under his pillow, and held it to his chest.

Cyrus, one of his bunkmates, threw a hat at him. "Bakhtiar, you only know how to hug books?" The others, freshly returned from the canteen, laughed.

Behrouz put the hat on. "I've already read it," he said. "Just thinking about it now."

"He couldn't read a street sign if he saw one," said Cyrus. Again the others laughed.

Behrouz reached for his pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it.

"We can smoke in tents now?" said Cyrus. "Didn't know the rules had changed."

"I can. You idiots can't hold a cigarette unless your mommies do it for you."

"Cyrus had a nanny. The rest of us had mommies," said another of the men.

The front of the tent opened and in walked Rameen. Behrouz killed his cigarette. The others stood at attendance.

Rameen laughed. "At ease, gentlemen. How about a cigarette, Mr. Behrouz?"

Behrouz held out the pack. Rameen put a stick into his mouth. He waited for Behrouz to light it.

"So is it true, Mr. Cyrus?" Rameen looked up, taking a drag. "You had a nanny?"

"No, sir," Cyrus replied. "My grandmother raised me, sir."

"Oh, so both a nanny and a mommy?" said Rameen. The other men laughed. But Behrouz remained still. Rameen eyed him, then noticed the book on his bed. "Like to read, do you?"

"He just pretends, sir," Cyrus said.

"Shut up, granny boy," Rameen replied. "Well?" he asked again. Behrouz nodded.

"Not just any book, I see." Rameen studied the cover. He winked at Behrouz.

"Here. Brought you dinner." Rameen handed Behrouz a paper bag. "Someone who smokes so much can use all the food he can get."

"Thanks," Behrouz said stiffly, taking the bag.

"Feel sick or something?" Rameen asked.

"Just lost my appetite tonight."

"Well, I'm returning your favour." Rameen nodded at the other soldiers and left the tent.

Behrouz placed the food on his bed and lit another cigarette. His hands shook slightly.

"Someone has a favourite. Are you bending over for him?" asked Cyrus.

"You're a piece of shit," said Behrouz.

Cyrus sat back on his bed, folding his arms under his head. "If you can read those big books, how come you never read them to us?"

"Like you'd understand them," said Pasha, a Turkish boy from Tabriz.

Behrouz put the food under his bed, lay back, and held the book to his chest again. He stared at its cover and tried to make out the words. He'd been trying for a year. He knew what the book was. He knew that Rameen could have arrested him for having it. He put a hand to his chest to feel his heartbeat.



THAT NIGHT, AFTER hours without sleep, Behrouz left his tent. Only Cyrus was awake.

"Where you going?" Cyrus asked.

"To see where little village boys like you get sent for spankings," Behrouz replied.

When he entered through the tent flap, he found Rameen at his desk. "This is an early visit," Rameen said. He didn't look up.

Behrouz fished in his pockets, and remembered he'd forgotten his cigarettes. "What are you writing?" he asked.

"A report on banned books," Rameen said. "Like the kind you have." He looked at Behrouz, then broke into laughter. "You like reading that book, do you? If anybody else had seen it, things would be different."

Behrouz nodded.

Rameen got up from the desk and walked over to his bed. He sat and leaned against his bedpost, his shoulders square against it. By the way his uniform rested on his frame, Behrouz could tell his body was strong, muscular. He watched as Rameen stretched his long legs.

"This place must be different from where you come from," said Behrouz.

"Not so different. There are as many idiots here."

"I mean the small beds, the mess-hall food, the cold."

"Your food is perfect." Rameen smiled.

"You're young yet. You may change your mind," Behrouz replied.

Rameen reached under his mattress and pulled out something. "You want to read it now?" he asked. It was the same book Behrouz had. "Let's look together." He patted the bed. "Will you read aloud for me?"

Behrouz reached for his cigarettes again, even though he knew he had none. Then he sat on the edge of the bed with his back to Rameen, who held the book over his shoulder.

Behrouz took it. He turned a page. He opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

He tried again, yet the words on the page were not forming on his lips the way he had always dreamed they would.

"I knew it," Rameen said, sitting up. "You can't read, can you?" He grabbed the book back. "Why do you carry it around if you can't read it?"

Behrouz scratched his neck, his fingers running over his Adam's apple. "I know what's in it," he finally said, not turning around. "My wife read some of it to me before she got tired."

"You're married? And your wife can read but you can't?" Behrouz felt Rameen shift on the bed. "That doesn't answer my question," he said.

Behrouz looked around the dimly lit tent, hoping that somehow its silence and shadows would give him an answer. But in the end, he could only hang his head. "She worked for some people. They paid for lessons. She reads a little."

"Want me to teach you?" Rameen asked.

Behrouz said nothing.

"You know what can happen to me if they catch us, though? Not too many captains teach their men how to read books that scare the Shah. The secret police would be outside this tent before you know it." He laughed, and Behrouz realized that Rameen was enjoying himself.

"I've only heard stories," Behrouz replied quietly. "But one should be careful about the stories one hears. People like to turn one lashing into a hundred."

"One lashing is enough, as is one execution," Rameen replied. His tone had changed. "If I were you, I'd learn to read every book on that list to show up those scum."

"No one believed the boy who cried wolf for a reason," Behrouz said.

"Let's drop it." Rameen turned Behrouz around to face him. "Want me to read to you? Yes, that's it. I should read to you."