

WORKING DRAFT

DARKNESS - A NOVEL

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Translated from the Persian by Sara Khalili

Chapter 1

Here, where you are, is dark. As though tar has rained from the sky. Puddles of darkness everywhere, and no glimmer of light. You hear groans, wails, echoes of pain. Your knees shake with fear. You don't know if you are dreaming or awake. Your heart wants to burst out of your chest. There is a fetid stench in the air. The smell of urine and blood and pus. The dark that surrounds you, will not set you free. "What is this place?!" you shout. "Who are you?!" You don't know how you arrived here. Was it night or day? There is darkness beneath your feet. You're dizzy. You're afraid of looking back. Afraid of stepping out onto the street. Afraid of looking at the tree, at your hands, at the shadow cast on the wall. You are even afraid of a quiet room. Every night, when you lie down on your bed, you end up in darkness. Your mouth tastes bitter. You dread closing your eyes. Your heart races. When you climb down the stairs, you slowly sink into the darkness ... and torment begins.

It's dark. You want to rape the girl slumped on the floor. You can hear her palpitating breaths. You blindly run your hand over her body. She recoils. You press your hand over her mouth to stifle her screams. You shout, "God, forgive me!" With her wrists bound, the girl struggles. You tear her dress. The girl struggles. You grope her body. "God, forgive me!" Her body shrinks. You stroke her breasts, her neck. Your fingers sink into a slimy dark. The girl has no head. Horrified, you shout, "God, forgive me!" You try to escape. You can't. Blood oozes from the girl's neck. Blood. Your hands are stained. You try to pull away. You can't. You thrash about to free yourself. Your head slams against the edge of the radiator. You shout, "God, forgive me!"

It's dark. Someone is standing on the edge of the roof. You can hear him panting. There's chaos down below. The smell of smoke. You holler, you push him, he plunges ... There's chaos down below. He's still standing on the edge of the roof. You holler, you push him, he plunges ... plunges ...

You scream, "Don't touch me!"

It's dark. A child is crying, behind you, in front of you, over there. The child is in your arms. He is screaming in pain. You're afraid to touch his eyes. You know his dark eyes are brimming with blood. He is looking at you. Terrified, you put the child down and you run in the dark. Every direction you go, you hear the child crying. Again, you put the child down and you run. You shout, "This isn't my child! I have no child!" Something crunches under your feet. It's snowing. Black snowflakes. Bleeding eyes are watching you in the dark. You shudder. A man is dozing off next to you. You blow the opium smoke in the child's face. You shout, "This isn't my child."

You shout, "Where am I? Who are you?! ... Why are you tormenting me!? Why won't you leave me be?"

It's dark. Your stomach is bleeding. You panic. Pus and black blood trickle down your thighs. Your hands smell of blood and semen. Something is hanging from your navel. It looks like a padlock. Its steel ring grows larger. It's heavy. It's painful. Your stomach is bleeding ... You bandage the gash. It won't stop bleeding ... it won't stop bleeding ...

It's dark. Your fists are full of stones. There is commotion in the darkness behind you. You hurl stones, hurl stones ... Your fists are full of stones. Groans rise from the darkness before you. You hurl stones at darkness. Darkness groans. Women ululate. The stones are larger. Your

hands cannot hold them. Darkness groans. You blindly run your hand over the ground searching for stones. Your hand touches a slipper. You pull back, terrified ... Women ululate ...

“What is this sound!? It won’t let me sleep ... It seems someone is moaning ... Every night ... every night.”

“I’m afraid ... I’m afraid of this darkness!”

It’s dark. You’re standing in the corridor of a train and you can’t keep your balance. It feels as though the train is speeding through your head. You shout, “My head is bursting! ... I’m losing my mind! ...” You hear the rattle of the wagons, the screech of the steel wheels grating against your skull. You lie down on the train’s roof. You put your ear against the cold steel. You hear whispers down below. You smell blood. You’re afraid you’ll drop the knife. You shout, “There’s a train running through my head!”

It’s dark. Ropes hanging from the darkness. Every direction you turn, a black rope hits you on the cheek, on the mouth. They have surrounded you. Your knees shake ... The ropes coil around your torso. You cannot move. They coil around your legs, around your neck. You panic. You cannot breathe ...

You gag ... “What a stench! I’m about to vomit ...” You vomit. “It smells foul here! I’m about to vomit ...” You vomit, you vomit ...

It’s dark. You hear a faint tap. You jolt up. You sense someone deep inside the darkness, watching you. You cover your breasts with your hands. You’re frightened. You claw at the bed to grab the sheet. Your hand touches the fat man sleeping beside you. Your heart races. You want to get out of the bed, but ~~it seems~~ it’s floating in the air. You peer over the edge into the darkness below. You hear a windchime ... A hand touches you. You scream, “Don’t touch me!” You cover your breasts with your hands. Your heart is racing. You’re naked. You’re wearing one

shoe. Hard as you try, you can't take it off. You struggle. A hand touches you. You scream, "Don't touch me!"

"I'm trembling ... Why is it so quiet? Where is everyone? I'm afraid ... Why is it so quiet here!? I'm cold ... It's as if I've been alone here for forty years ..."

It's dark. You're frantic. You're rushing down stairs. The blare of a siren echoes in your head. You shout, "Why won't this damn siren stop!?" You're rushing down stairs. There are more stairs, stairs, stairs ... You feel you're sinking in darkness. There's commotion down there. You shout, "Where am I? Why is there no end to the stairs!?" A little boy is clinging to your leg and won't let go. "Why aren't we reaching the basement?" You sense people watching you from above the staircase. "Don't touch me!" The boy is clinging to your leg and won't let go. You shout, "No! Don't turn on the lights!" You're rushing down stairs. You're frantic. There are more stairs, stairs ...

"For the love of God, have mercy! Let me out of this darkness ... Have mercy. I'm terrified of the dark ... I can't take it anymore. I'm losing my mind ... Why won't this darkness end? ... Have mercy on me!"

It's dark. The air reeks of rotten fish. Cries and moans resonate from the earth. You crawl on your hands and knees. You press your ear to the ground and listen. A hand grabs at your hair. Your hair is pulled into the earth. You panic. Hard as you struggle, you cannot pull your hair out. Your scalp is tearing. You scream in pain. Your face is pressed against the dirt. Your swollen fingers dig into the ground. Black ants crawl on your face ... your mouth fills with ants ...

You shout, "God, forgive me!"

It's dark. You have him in a chokehold from behind. He wheezes ... Your hands have numbed. He wheezes ... With frozen hands, you squeeze his throat. He struggles. He kicks his

heels into the snow. You tighten your grip. You bite your lip. He wheezes. Your lipstick tastes of blood. He wheezes ... he wheezes ...

There is commotion. There is a stench in the air ... The sky is dark and time seems to have stood still.

You shout, “What is this place?! ... Who are you?! ... Who are you?!”

Chapter 3

When he heard a key's notches and teeth grate in the front door lock, he quickly closed the storage room door and stood quietly with his back to it, clutching a screwdriver.

He heard the key rasp as it was pulled out. It was the wrong one. She must have not turned on the hallway light. But the second key was the right one. It turned, the lock clicked and opened. The wind chime above the door vibrated and jingled and the door closed again. He heard the click-clacking of Marjan's shoes as she hurried over to the lamp at the end of the L-shaped living room and then walked back and went toward the bedroom. For a moment, there was no sound, and then again, the tapping of her heels as she went to another room.

The storage space was small and dark. He was still holding the screwdriver and standing motionless with his back to the door. He squeezed his lips together to stop the puff of laughter from bursting out. He sometimes pulled these kinds of pranks. He would arrange the pillows under the blanket to look as if he were sleeping there, and when Marjan nudged them and called his name, he would suddenly pop up behind her and make her scream.

The click-clack of her shoes grew faster and went to the front door. The door creaked and slowly opened. "Come in!" she said softly.

Again, he heard the wind chime and the dull thud of the door closing. Marjan said, "Come in! We're alone."

His breath froze in his chest. There was no sound other than the rustle of their down winter coats. It seemed they were standing together in front of the door. Then he heard Marjan sigh. Slow, and deep.

"Come here," she said.

A man's heavy footsteps passed the storage room and went as far as the sofa.

"Sit here, darling."

He heard the sofa groan. This time, he heard them kiss, louder.

"Let me take these off ..."

Something struck the bottom of the storage room door.

It startled him.

The second shoe landed on the stone tiles, near the door.

"Would you like some wine?"

"What if he shows up?"

"There's vodka, too. I told you, his flight isn't until eleven tonight."

Her voice trailed past the storage room. The man's voice rang from farther away, "Why did he go to Gheshm? For fun?"

One of the cabinet doors opened and closed.

"But, I prefer wine. I think it was for a documentary."

The base of a glass bottle hit the wood surface of the kitchen counter.

"He didn't really explain."

A matchstick scraped against the sulfur strip and lit.

"And here's ..."

He smelled burnt phosphorus and floral-scented wax paraffin.

"A candle! ... Let me turn off the light ..."

He remained tense and still. He thought of tearing open the door and bursting out ...

"Saeed, come and see if you can reach the wine glasses up there."

Saeed! ... Saeed! ... She had mentioned the name several times. Saeed! ... She said he had gone with her to the dealership and helped her sell that jalopy for a fair price. Otherwise, she would have been swindled.

The sound of men's shoes passed the storage room and went to the kitchen.

He had heard her talking to him on the telephone once ...

"Be careful."

Perhaps twice.

"I ... c-can't reach ... them."

A drawer was pulled open and quickly closed, making the silverware rattle.

"Let me bring a chair. Wait ... Where are my slippers?"

He thought, I'm the one who always brings the wine glasses down from up there ...

The wooden legs of a chair thumped against the ceramic tiles.

"Don't bother taking off your shoes."

The chair creaked. It sounded as if it couldn't bear that weight.

"Be careful ... you've gotten chubby ..."

"Stop! ... Don't! ..."

And he heard a kiss. Loud. She must have kissed his soft belly.

He was gripping the screwdriver so tight that his fingers felt numb.

The man hopped down from the chair. He sounded heavy.

"Now, ..."

The cork popped ... and wine gurgled into glasses.

"The fuller one is yours."

The rim of two glasses clinked together.

“Cheers!”

“Mmmm ...” Marjan murmured.

She must have closed her eyes, as always.

“Is this one of the wines from last year?”

“Those are long gone. Of course, I stashed a couple of bottles in the storage room, to save them for forty years from now. How is it?”

“I like the bouquet. How many bottles so far?”

“Let’s go sit on the sofa, these are uncomfortable. Eighty, I think.”

Footsteps moved leisurely to the living room, and again he heard the sofa groan. This time louder, as if they had sat down at the same time, or Marjan had sat on his lap ... on Saeed’s lap.

Clink! ... The rim of the glasses touched again, and then ... silence. There was no sound, not for the length of time it takes to drink a sip of wine. It was longer. Perhaps they were kissing again. But given the distance, he wouldn’t hear Marjan if she were sighing, or purring, “Mmmm ...”

The foot of a wine glass landed on the glass top of the coffee table in the middle of the living room, and then a second one ... Ding!

“Give me one, too.”

“You’ve smoked a lot today!”

He heard the flick of a lighter.

“I don’t smoke that much ... one or two at most ...”

“You’ve gone through a whole pack since noon ... Let’s share this one.”

The floor was cold and he wasn't wearing socks. And he wished he had gone to the bathroom beforehand.

"No, I swear. Today was different. I really don't smoke that much. It bothers me."

"Can you bring an ashtray?"

"We don't have one. Put it ..."

The smell of cigarette smoke wafted as far as the storage room. He thought, I shouldn't cough.

"You don't have an ashtray!?"

She had the habit of flicking her cigarette ashes on a tissue.

"Let me change into something comfortable. This is too tight."

His arm was tired. He wanted to put the screwdriver on one of the metal shelves, but he was afraid it would make a sound.

Just then, a wine glass tipped over on the coffee table and fell on the stone tiles. Its sound shattered like glass ... His hand must have accidentally hit it ... Saeed's hand.

Marjan's voice came from the bedroom. "Don't worry about it."

Her voice was muffled, as if her arms were in the sleeves of her dress and her head had not yet come out through its neckline, or perhaps it was being muted as she rifled through her lingerie drawer.

"Where's the broom?"

The sound of the glass shattering was still ringing in his ears.

"It's in the storage room."

He remembered that the broom was there next to him. He was too scared to move, afraid that his foot might knock into it.

“Don’t bother. I’ll clean it up later.”

Men’s shoes thumped toward the storage room.

Again, his breath froze in his chest. He was cold and his hand clutching the screwdriver was sweating.

“I’ll clean it up. You’ll step on the shards.”

He panicked. He didn’t know what to do.

The footsteps came up to the storage room door.

There was silence ... He held his breath and pressed his back against the door. He could feel the man’s presence on the other side. It felt as though they were standing back to back.

“What a color!”

It was Saeed’s voice. His back was turned.

From the bedroom door, Marjan said, “You bought this for me. Don’t you remember? When you went to Behbahan.”

“Wow! You still have it!”

His voice moved one step away from the door.

“Well, I really like it.”

It was Marjan. And then quietly, perhaps flirtatiously, she said, “Come here ...”

There was longing in her voice. The sound of the men’s shoes moved toward the bedroom. Again, there was silence.

His bare feet were now ice cold. The chill had crept up to his ankles. He remembered that he had rolled up his socks and tossed them there, next to the bed ... he wasn’t sure ...

“Take ... these ... off ...”

Or under the bed. Perhaps Marjan hadn’t turn on the bedroom lights, as usual.

“It’s so cold in here!”

She would not have turned them on.

“Climb in under this ...”

He knew Marjan had a strong sense of smell. He thought, what if she traces the odor, and naked – Marjan is naked – she bends down and sees the rolled-up socks under the bed, or next to it.

“Mmmm ...”

“Sweetheart ...”

“Shhh, come on top.”

Now he could hear them through the thin wall adjacent to the bedroom.

“I’ve missed you ...”

“Mmmm ...”

He imagined he could even hear their breaths.

“Mmmm ...”

“My darling ...”

The bed was softly squeaking.

He was trembling, from the cold. He wished he had gone to the bathroom earlier. He was worried that he wouldn’t be able to hold himself much longer. He pressed his thighs together.

The sound of Marjan’s *mmm* ... was still echoing in his ears.

He gripped the screwdriver even tighter. He wanted to swing open the door and tear out.

“Let me turn over.”

She always liked to lie on her stomach, it gave her more pleasure.

The bed started to squeak again and Marjan’s voice grew louder ...

“Mmm ... ooo ... aa ... aaah ...”

And she moaned. Like she always moaned ... And as though she had flung herself on a grave and was clawing at the earth, she howled ...

The bed stopped creaking. It grew quiet. They grew quiet.

He thought, they must be whispering. Softly.

The tip of the screwdriver accidentally hit the edge of a metal shelf and gently clanked!

He held his breath. He sensed one of them, perhaps Marjan, had turned to look in the direction of the storage room.

His heart was pounding ...

For a moment there was silence. Or perhaps he had stopped hearing.

“What’s the matter!?”

He stopped breathing.

Marjan didn’t answer.

She must have heard the clank ... or ...

“Let’s go.”

It was Marjan’s voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Let’s go!”

He had forgotten all about his suitcase! Perhaps in the dim light she had seen its metal handle shine in the corner of the bedroom.

There was no panic in her voice.

No, she hadn’t seen it. The curtains were drawn. Only a sliver of light through the narrow gap between the curtains could have shined in on the suitcase.

Now, there were more sounds, louder. It seemed they were getting dressed. Then he heard the bathroom door open and close.

He felt he could not hold himself any longer. He squeezed his thighs together even more.

The sound of men's shoes went from the bedroom to the living room. The shards of glass were crushing under their heels ...

He heard the toilet flush.

"These books weren't here before!"

Marjan's voice rang out from the bedroom, "Some of them are his."

Then she added, "Most of them are mine."

There was the flick of a lighter.

The click-clack of Marjan's shoes went as far as the front door and stopped.

"Let's go."

The men's shoes went over to her.

"What about the broken glass!?"

The screwdriver was still in his fist. He was shaking.

"It doesn't matter. I'll just say Nahid was here."

And sounding anxious, she said, "Let's go!"

He didn't hear the rustle of the down coats. The front door opened, the wind chime vibrated and jingled, and the door closed again. He slowly let out the breath he had held in his chest ... his thighs relaxed ... he felt his left thigh grow warm and ... wetness slowly trickled down to his feet.

Chapter 4

He felt he was standing on darkness.

There was no sound. It was dark and quiet everywhere. He couldn't see anything, he was blindfolded. He was just standing there, waiting. For a long time. For hours. It was as if he had always been standing there. Time had protracted and from beneath the blindfold it had seeped into his eyes, his ears, his head. His body was filled with silence and darkness.

His hands were tied in front of him. The prison guard had held him by the arm and led him here from the solitary confinement cell, to this room. They had walked down a long corridor that turned right and became even longer, darker. He had walked on his heels, limping. The guard had brought him as far as this room and he had left. And the heavy steel door had closed with the reverberation of metal, behind him, inside his head.

Now, darkness was before him. Face to face. He was standing on it. He felt as though it was pushing him from behind. He could smell a rotting cadaver some distance away. He sensed there was someone in the room, but there was no sound. The soles of his feet were swollen and raw. He couldn't stand properly. He was still in pain. His knees were bent, his back was bent, his neck was bent. He wanted to sit, on the floor, to lie down on his back, on his stomach.

Before throwing him in solitary confinement, they had tied his legs to the bedpost and whipped his feet with a cable. He had screamed. Loud. As loud as he could. He had heard that shouting would reduce the pain. But his pain had not diminished. His feet had swollen and there was still pus and watery blood oozing from the cuts. In his cell, he had walked, groaning and in pain. One step, another step, slowly, carefully, and he had gone around and around . . . moaning. He had heard that if you don't walk after a flogging, your feet swell. They had swelled.

He felt there was someone there, but there was no sound. They had told him that after the whipping and solitary confinement, it would be time for the interrogation. The waiting room. The regret room. Haji Saeed's room.

Time seemed to have stopped. He didn't know whether it was day or night. He was cold.

He heard the rustle of a sheet of paper. Soft, swishing. The silence had been so profound that he couldn't tell where it had come from. From everywhere. He heard someone getting up. From a chair. A soft reverberation slowly moved toward him. It sounded like slippers shuffling on the floor. Then it was quiet again. He felt someone was watching him. For an instant he clenched his fist around the darkness.

Darkness said, "What's your name?"

The voice echoed louder in his ears. His lower lip quivered and from deep inside his throat he said, "Morteza."

Darkness shouted, "Louder!"

A dark hand slapped him. Hard. Unexpectedly. His cheek burned, he reeled and fell on the floor, on the dark. His ear was ringing. Silence had disappeared. His hands bound, he turned and leaned on one shoulder to try and get up. But he couldn't. He fell back. This time he struggled using his shoulder and his elbow and managed to sit up on his knees. His left ear was still buzzing. Darkness grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and pulled him up. He stood, on his heels. But his knees were bent. His back was bent.

Darkness gripped his neck, shoved him to one side, and pressed his face against a cold concrete wall. It felt coarse.

"Nose to the wall!"

Then, scuffing his feet, he slowly stepped back. The wall smelled of mold.

From a distance, Darkness asked, “Why did they bring you here?”

The voice sounded older.

He said, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? . . . I see . . .”

It was as if Darkness were nodding to confirm his own words.

“Why do you think they brought you here?”

He remained quiet.

“What kind of work do you do? What’s your job?”

The voice was kinder now.

“I write.”

“You write . . . I see . . . with the right or the left hand?”

He wondered why he had asked that.

“With the right. But I’m left-handed.”

Darkness read the text aloud, “‘When the photo of a political leader is printed larger than the size of a stamp, the danger of dictatorship is certain.’ Interesting!”

He thought there must be one of those large pictures here, too. Much larger than a stamp. In a wide wood frame. There must be one. They have hung it on the dark. They have hammered a nail into the dark and they have hung the frame from it.

“Who is this Nabokov? Do you know him? . . . He has such a difficult name.”

He said nothing.

“Oh, and sometime ago, I think it was in an interview . . . What was it you wrote?”

He could hear sheets of paper being shuffled.

“‘I will not submit to censorship!’ Really?”

He didn't know what to say.

"Did you . . . write this?"

He said nothing.

"Yes?"

The voice had moved closer.

"I asked you a question: did you write this?"

And Darkness grabbed his head from behind and slammed his face into the wall.

"You filth!"

His face smashed into the coarse concrete. For an instant the darkness turned red.

His nose had gone numb. When he touched it with the back of his bound hands, he couldn't feel it. He felt something warm above his mouth and a slimy wetness slowly trickled down over his swollen lips.

"Why didn't you sign the paper they gave you?"

Again, his lower lip quivered.

"Because what they had written was not true . . ."

He tasted blood.

"I wasn't there . . . I don't know those people. . . I told them, 'I am neither a spy, nor . . .'"

"You don't know them? Is that so? . . . How about illicit affairs? Are you claiming you haven't had any?!"

"I haven't."

"You have to fess up to one or the other . . . it's your choice. You will sign and . . . that's all there is to it. And you'll get out."

He remained silent. For a long while. Then he murmured, "I can't."

There was silence. Then Darkness quietly said, “You can’t . . . I see . . .”

Suddenly, he heard the sound of boots coming toward him. Only then did he realize there was a second person in the room. Perhaps the same prison guard who had brought him there. It seemed Darkness had motioned to someone standing to the side, waiting for an order.

Without realizing how, he was torn from the dark with a single move and hurled to the floor, and the boots started kicking him mercilessly from the left and the right, in the ribs, in the face and legs and back. It was as if two people were beating him.

He was writhing in pain and rolling on darkness. Again, as if with the gesture of a hand, the boots stopped and moved to the other side of the room.

Then all went quiet again . . . he was lying on his side, clawing in pain at the dark. He felt the fragment of a chipped tooth on his tongue.

There was a beep!

With his tongue, he pushed the fragment to the corner of his lips.

“For the love of God, Morteza! . . . Have pity on me . . .”

It was Mehri’s voice! He tore his head from the floor and turned toward Darkness.

“Do whatever they say . . . for the love of God, Morteza . . . give in . . .”

She couldn’t stop crying.

“I’m dying of grief, Morteza . . . have pity on me . . .”

There was another beep and Mehri’s voice was cut off.

“The poor thing is so worried about you.”

His heart was pounding. Again he heard the rustle of sheets of paper.

“Now . . . if you want to sign this, get up and come over here.”

He leaned on his elbows and hoisted himself onto his knees. But he remained in this half-crouch.

“Do you want me to help you get up?”

He could still hear Mehri’s voice. “For the love of God, Morteza . . . you’re killing me with grief . . .”

His head was down. He could smell the dark floor. With the tip of his tongue he moved the tooth fragment between his lips and . . . he spat.

Again, as though with a motion of the dark hand, the boots approached him and . . . a hand grabbed him under the arm to help him stand, but he pulled his shoulder away. He didn’t want to get up.

The one wearing boots, perhaps a prison guard, must have glanced over at Darkness, wondering what his next move should be, waiting for orders . . . and Darkness must have waved him off, because he went and stood to the side.

Silence again. He had an itch above his lips. His head was hanging and his face was close to his bound hands. He could still taste the saltiness of blood in his mouth.

Clink!

He heard the soft clink of a metal object.

Clink!

He didn’t know what was making that noise. It sounded like two pieces of metal tapping against each other.

The silence grew deeper. All he heard was the occasional clink! . . . Clink!

He heard a chair’s bones creaking and from deep within the darkness the slippers moved toward him.

Clink!

Clink!

He was trying to lean on his wrists and get up when the treads of the plastic slippers came to rest on his fingers . . . and pressed down . . . so hard that his bones were about to break.

Clink!

Again, he heard the metal object. This time it was close. Next to his ear.

“You . . . have to learn . . . that when you are told to sign . . . you will sign.”

Clink!

“No matter what . . .”

The sound resembled the metal tips of a pair of pincers snapping. Or pliers.

He could feel the pungent smell of tea rose cologne that had blended with Darkness’s sweat.

“Which hand did you say you write with . . . the right?”

The bones in his hand were breaking.

Clink!

He felt the chill of the metal object . . . pliers or pincers . . . on the tip of his middle finger.

“You have to learn to sign whatever is put in front of you.”

He pressed the tip of the pliers under his fingernail . . . it hurt.

“You will learn . . . everyone learns . . .”

Darkness pushed harder . . . the pain sharpened. He felt a burning sensation under his nail.

“You all learn fast . . . very fast . . .”

The tip of the pliers bit into the tip of his nail. His finger was shaking. He felt his nail separating from his flesh.

“Did you hear how she was begging you?”

Gradually, his hand, arm, and shoulder began to tremble, too.

“Did you hear how she was weeping?”

The pain of the nail as it separated from the finger spread throughout his body.

“Why? . . . Why are you doing this to yourself, Morteza?”

His breath was short and rasping.

Darkness slowly tugged on the pliers. He felt his nail ripping out from the root.

Silence returned. His entire being had become that finger and that throbbing nail.

Softly, he said, “But you will learn.”

And he yanked off the nail.

He felt his shoulder splitting from his torso . . . and all that darkness suddenly flooded his gaping mouth.

Chapter 5

“Guard!”

He was sleeping. Exhausted, he rolled over in bed.

“Get up, Soldier!”

This time he heard the voice. It was the sergeant. It was again his turn to go on guard duty. Drowsy and lethargic, with eyes still closed, he half rose, pushed aside the sheet, and sat on the edge of the bed. He had slept with his pants on, and his undershirt. He was hot. He took the cup from the nightstand and raised it to his mouth. It was empty. He reached under the bed and picked up his boots. One foot after the other, he turned them over and shook them. He was afraid of tarantulas. He pulled the boots on his bare feet and tied the laces into tight knots. Still sitting, he sucked in his stomach and strapped on his bandolier. He felt around and grabbed the rifle he had left leaning against the wall. He stood up and slung it over his shoulder. It was heavy. He touched his head and realized he had gone to bed with his hat on.

It was cold outside. The snow crunched under his feet. He pulled his hat down over his ears and walked a few steps in one direction and walked back. He had to pace those few feet back and forth in the dead of night until the next guard arrived, and then he could go back to bed.

It was pitch black. There was no moon in the sky, nor any stars. He heard a sound. He stopped.

“Sleep!” Mehri said softly.

His eyes were heavy. The rifle’s strap was chafing his shoulder. He shifted it to his other shoulder and started pacing again. He went as far as the earthwork and walked back to the munitions container. Back and forth. He was cold. He rubbed his hands together, held them up to

his mouth and breathed on them. *Ha—a ... Ha—a ...* He craved a cigarette. He ran his fingers over the pocket next to his left knee and felt the pack. But he didn't have the nerve to light one.

He heard a car in the distance. Far away. He stopped and peered into the night. Infinite darkness. He wanted to sleep. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He spun around. There was no one there. He had to keep moving to stay warm, otherwise he would freeze. He pulled his foot out of a snow-filled ditch and started again. Back and forth. Poor Amir. The night before last, it was his turn to stand guard, and in the morning he was dead. Curled up next to the earthwork. His face was frozen and there was a thin streak of darkened blood around his neck.

"I'm talking to you, idiots!" Master Sergeant had shouted. "Don't you dare sleep on duty!"

"Yes, Sir!" He clicked his heels together and slush splattered on his pants.

"Shhh! ..."

He sensed the scent of Mehri's body. She slid her leg over his bare legs to keep them still. It was hot. He shook his pants and again walked toward the earthwork. Slowly. Back and forth. His face stung from the icy gusts. He felt something under his foot. He bent down and dug his hand into the soft snow and picked it up. It was a small tube, metal, cold. He rubbed it on his undershirt and dried it. Mehri took his hand and murmured, "Sleep!" He twisted the bottom of the tube and felt its narrow tip with his fingers. It was soft and slippery. He smelled his fingers. They smelled of woman.

He heard a muffled voice behind him. It sounded as if someone far away was calling out, "Morteza!"

He turned and stared into the dark. He clenched the metal tube in his empty fist.

"Help!" The voice was now more stifled, but it was familiar.

He hunched his shoulders and warily took one step forward. And then, another step.

“Amir!” he called out loud.

“Shh ...” Mehri whispered.

The night was still. His heart was pounding in his chest. He heard Amir rasping some distance away. Frightened, he took a few steps back. Suddenly, darkness gave way under his feet and he plunged into a snow pit he couldn’t see, and he screamed. Mehri jolted awake.

“Morteza, what’s wrong?”

“My leg!” he groaned. “My leg!”

“It’s all right! It’s all right!”

And she rubbed his shin.

Pain coursed through his body. He clenched his teeth. “Aaaaa! ...”

Mehri put her hand on his knee and gently straightened his leg.

“It hurts!”

Mehri tore the sheet and there next to the munitions container bandaged his leg. The pain eased. He rolled onto his side. He was sleepy. He struggled up on one leg and leaned against the container. The seat of his pants was wet from the snow. When he opened his fist, the metal tube was no longer there. He swept his gaze over the dark ground and saw nothing. He limped toward the earthwork and stopped. It was windy. He walked back ... He heard something. It wasn’t the wind. It sounded like two people whispering. It was coming from over there. No, from over there.

“If you’re not careful, they’ll slash your throat with a wire, you morons! They’ll strangle you! ... They come out of the dark.”

He took the rifle from his shoulder, grabbed it with both hands, and shouted, “Halt! ... Who’s there?”

Crouching low, he sharpened his ears and peered into the night. Now, there was silence.

“You can’t see them, but they can see you!”

He felt all that darkness glaring at him.

“They were speaking Farsi,” Amir said. “I swear, I’m not lying. I heard them ... and one of them was a woman.”

There was someone behind him. He could feel the fog wafting from their mouth on the back of his neck. He swung around and grabbed at the dark. Mehri drowsily muttered, “Go to sleep, my dear ... go to sleep ...”

And she took his hand and gently lay it on her chest. He was hot and sweating.

“I’m thirsty.”

Mehri must have not heard him. He slid his hand out from under hers, slung his rifle on his shoulder, and took a few steps toward the earthwork. He didn’t dare go any further. He stopped and listened. There was only the sound of the wind. But there was someone there.

“Who’s there?” he shouted.

There was no answer. He thought it might be an animal. He bent down and took a fistful of snow and rocks and hurled it in that direction. He sensed something move in the dark. His knees were shaking. He pulled the rifle’s breechblock and aimed at the dark. He heard footsteps on the snow. With his thumb he pressed the fire control switch to automatic, and yelled, “Halt!”

Darkness moved, he pulled the trigger ... *tatatatatatata* ... His ears rang, and there was quiet everywhere. “Here,” Mehri said, “drink some water ... Drink.”

He was shaking. His teeth knocked against the rim of the glass.

“I’m cold, Mehri.”

Mehri pulled at the blanket, draped it over his shoulders, and wrapped her arms around him. Little by little, he warmed up and his eyes grew heavy. He craved a cigarette. The smell of

tobacco filled his senses. He balanced the stock of the rifle on the toe of his boot and leaned against the munitions container. His leg still hurt. He reached into his pants pocket for the pack of cigarettes. But it was just a piece of stale bread. It was hard. He tossed it on the ground. It made no sound, as though it sank in the dark. He took a step forward. Then another step. It was still quiet. Then he heard the metal cylinder fall. He squatted down on the balls of his feet, put one knee on the ground, and blindly ran his hand over the snow ... He felt the metal tube with his icy fingers. He picked it up and smelled it. It reeked of gunpowder.

“Sleep, my dear” Mehri murmured.

He knew he shouldn't doze off on guard duty, but his eyelids were heavy and he couldn't keep them open. Sleep washed over him and a sense of pleasure spread in his body. He heard a faint rustle. Something had moved behind him. He was about to leap to his feet when darkness suddenly coiled around his neck and choked his breath. His scream rose from deep in his throat.

“Morteza!” Mehri cried out as she grabbed him by the shoulders.

He couldn't breathe. He clutched the woman's slim wrists. He was gasping for air. His head swung back and beat against the wall and his torso thrust up. He was suffocating. He was pushing down on his heels and thrashing about ... Holding back her sobs, Mehri pleaded, “Sleep, Morteza! ... Sleep! ... The war ended five years ago ... I swear ... For the love of God, sleep!”

He couldn't breathe ... he was rasping ... it stopped ... and slowly his hands went limp.

Chapter 6

“Sit right here!”

The woman guard held her shoulders and turned her slightly so that her back was to the wall.

She sat down. They had thrown a large white sheet over her head. She couldn't see anything. It was morning. Near dawn, still dark. The corridor was empty at that hour. It was quiet. The guard must have still been standing there, otherwise she would have heard the heels of her tired shoes dragging away.

The wall she was leaning against was cold. Cement. She raised her chin a little, hoping to see something from under that dark tent. She saw nothing. It was quiet and the cloth reeked. It reeked of darkness.

She moved an inch away from the wall so that its chill would not seep into her body. She wished she had gone to the bathroom earlier. The loudspeaker crackled and . . . it shut off. She shuddered. She realized she was sitting under it, near the door.

The night before, she had again had the dream. The girls had all stayed up until dawn for her. But they remained silent. Only once, she heard them quietly whisper and realized they were not sleeping. Like her, who with eyes closed lay awake.

She put one hand over the other to stop them from shaking. Last night, while washing the dishes, a tin plate had slipped from her fingers and fallen on the floor with a loud clang. Nargess had hurried over and taken the sponge from her.

“I'll wash the rest.”

With her eyes closed, she had said, “No, no!”

Her wet eyelashes kept sticking together.

Nargess had taken her hands, held them under the running water, and with her shoulder pushed her aside and stood tight against her in front of the sink. Another girl took her by the arm and pulled her back.

“Your turn will be tomorrow.”

But tomorrow was today, and she was sitting there waiting for her name to be called on the loudspeaker.

Poor Morteza . . .

Her nose was running. She slipped her hand under the sheet to wipe it. The guard grabbed her wrist and yanked it away.

She raised her head and looked at the woman. Her face was dark. She stared at her thick eyebrows and the black hair above her lips. She wanted to ask to go to the bathroom . . . but she didn't. Her nose started to itch. Perforce, she turned her head, leaned it to one side, and rubbed her nose against her arm and shoulder. And again she sat motionless. Waiting. And again there was only silence and darkness that smelled of camphor.

The tip of her nose was cold, and as she breathed, she could feel the wet spot on the sheet against it.

The night before, she had again had the dream.

The dark was spreading in every direction and the silence was growing heavier . . . she gradually stopped feeling even the length of fabric shrouding her. She felt as though she were sitting naked in dense darkness, with nothing but emptiness stretching far away. Nothing.

She listened intently. She heard nothing but the distant hiss of a florescent light that sounded like it was half burned out and probably glowing yellow and flickering.

Poor Morteza . . .

She was cold.

May I go to the bathroom?

She thought it. There was no response. She pressed her thighs together . . . their warmth was pleasant.

The loudspeaker above her crackled again and a moment later a voice dryly announced, “Mehri A. . . . Mehri A.”

Her entire body started to convulse.

“Get up!” the woman guard snapped.

She suddenly felt drained. She could not. The guard grabbed her under the armpit and pulled her up to her feet. Her knees were weak. She took a step forward and one of her slippers stayed behind. Her feet were sweating. The guard waited for her to put it back on. With the tips of her toes she felt around and found it.

She walked a few more steps and heard the steel door open. Hard. Loud. She felt the cement ceiling silently move away and . . . fresh air. It was colder outside, the chill pressed against her sides. She needed to pee. A few people were talking a short distance away, and farther away she could hear cars. The cold snuck under her cover and her nipples hardened. She felt a drop trickle from her. The girls had told her there was an abandoned wasteland behind the prison, that it smelled of wheat, that at night you could hear dogs howling there.

With every step she took, she was careful not to let her slippers slide off her feet. One foot felt looser than the other. She pushed her toes deep in so that she could curl them and clamp onto the tip of the slippers.

Several pairs of boots stomped briskly toward her; the woman guard let go of her arm and handed her over. They must have been men; they grabbed onto the sheet covering her in such a way that their hands would not touch her as they pulled her along.

Further ahead, the ground was no longer paved with cement. It was dirt and rocks. She hoped the woman guard was still with them. A few small stones got stuck between her toes. Each time she raised one foot, she wriggled its toes to shake them off. But a few remained trapped between her two small toes.

She wondered why the dogs were not howling.

Soon, the ground sloped upward. Then it flattened again and they walked past something that smelled putrid. As they continued down a gentle slope, she heard a commotion in the distance. She realized a crowd had been brought there ahead of time to watch.

Last night, when she had closed her eyes, she had again had the dream. The people were not there, but she could hear them. Near and far. In every direction.

She smelled wheat.

The guard walking to her left was pulling her harder, as though in spite, so that her back and shoulders were tilted to that side. A few times she almost fell.

Several nights ago, she had jolted awake screaming. The girls gathered around her and Nargess ran and brought her a cup of water.

“Here, water . . . Drink it.”

Her eyes were still squeezed shut in horror. Nargess held the cup to her lips.

“Water . . . Drink.”

Someone quietly asked, “Why is your forehead bruised?”

And she remembered the dream.

“It’s swollen!”

Nargess gently touched the bruise and she screamed in pain.

She had dreamed of rocks.

The girls suddenly grew quiet. She took the cup from Nargess and carefully held it against her forehead . . . it was cold . . . the throbbing had eased a little.

It sounded as if a minibus was approaching from some distance away. Its rumble was growing louder. It moved closer and closer until it was nearby and the smell of dust and exhaust whirled in the air and crept under her covering.

The screams of a few women emerged from the minibus, one after the other, and spread in the dark. From where they were, they could probably see her draped from head to toe in that white cloth. Their wails grew louder.

“Oh, my daughter, my Mehri! . . . Oh, my precious, my Mehri!”

It was her mother, and the other two sobbing were her sisters.

She instinctively shifted toward them, but darkness menacingly yanked on her cover, meaning, Do not move!

“Mr. Saeed! . . . Mr. Saeed! . . . Forgive her! . . . Forgive her!”

She realized Saeed was there. He probably had not slept the night before either. Her brother-in-law should be there, too. The one who had seen her in a car with a man, a stranger, and had hurled a brick at the windshield and yelled, “You shameless harlot!” And he had run off to tell everyone.

Poor Morteza . . .

The crying and wailing stopped for a moment. She thought her mother must have fainted, and her sisters must now be splashing water on her face to revive her, so that she could again sob and scream, and again faint.

“Hello, Haji Agha . . .”

“Hello, Haji Agha . . .”

Someone had just arrived and those around her were greeting him quietly and respectfully. The man responded by mumbling, “Hello . . . hello . . .”

They pulled on the sheet and moved her a few steps to the side.

“Stand right here!”

There was malice in the voice.

She stood still. Again, she subtly pushed her sweaty feet into the slippers and felt the pebble still lodged between two small toes.

“*Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* . . . In the name of God the compassionate and merciful . . .”

The man’s voice coming over a megaphone silenced everyone. She thought he must be the judge. His pronunciation of the letter H was thick and guttural.

“*Qala Imam al-Sadiq alayhi as-salam, al-rajmo hadd Allah-u akbar va al-jaddo hadd Allah-u asqar* Imam Sadeq, peace be upon him, commands that stoning is the greater punishment and flogging the lesser punishment prescribed by the divine.”

Hearing the word stoning, her mother shrieked, and her cry sailed into the depths of darkness.

“For the love of your forefathers . . . Si—r! . . . Oh, God! . . .”

“The adulteress Mehri A., child of Cyrus, twenty-eight years old . . . found guilty of committing adultery as a married woman . . .”

It was his voice, the same fat mullah who had refused to look at her while questioning her, and had panted and wheezed as he wrote down her sentence.

“Pursuant to Article 221 and 225 of the Islamic Punishment Laws and based on the testimony of four Muslim men . . .”

She thought, Saeed and his brother . . . but who were the other two?

“ . . . and further to the judgment passed by the Fifth Branch of the Provincial Penal Court, which has been approved by Division 27 of the Supreme Court, the accused is sentenced to the greater punishment.”

There was pandemonium. Screams and shouts rose to the sky from all around. This time, it was not just her mother’s cries, but her sisters’ too, and that of other women who were probably, or perhaps, prisoners standing in the distance, at the far end of darkness, brought there to watch and to learn from horror.

“For the love of God, have mercy on her!”

“Have mercy!”

“I beseech you . . . for the love of God! . . . Mehri—i!”

“Silence! Silence!”

“I swear to God, this woman is innocent!”

“Mehri—i! . . . Oh, God! ”

“Stone me instead!”

And a man shouted, “You shameless tramp!”

Another hollered, “Adulteress!”

There was chaos. From every corner of the dark, someone yelled something, drowning out the voices of the guards barking, “Quiet! Quiet!”

They yanked at her cover and made her take a few steps forward. One of her slippers came off again and just as she tried to put it back on, darkness pushed her and blackness opened its maw and she shrieked as she plunged into a dark pit.

She was up to her chest in the narrow hole. The cloth had twisted tightly around her, pinning her arms to her sides. Terrified, she clawed and tore at it. She could barely breathe when she heard shovels grating and rasping behind her, in front of her, next to her. And dirt and rocks rained on her trembling arms and breasts and poured down to the bottom of the hole, onto her bare feet. She tried to stand on her tiptoes, to . . .

“Don’t move!”

. . . to pull her weight up. Stones rolled under her heels, her toes twisted and clenched onto her single slipper, small pebbles slid between them, and her toenails dug into the dirt. She was panting, her face was wet from the steam of her gasps. She wanted to scream, but the cloth was clinging to her face, muzzling her mouth. Sound could not escape her lips. With her shoulders, chest, and her entire being, she struggled to pull herself up, but a guard wearing boots kicked her in the back.

“I said, do not move!”

And she did not move.

The pit was cold. One of her pajama legs had rolled up. Her shin was aching from the chill and her knees were shaking from fear, and . . . she wet herself. Warmth trickled down her inner thighs . . . down the inside of one knee and onto her icy ankle. She felt a drop linger on her anklebone.

“It rests upon every Muslim to carry out God’s judgment and let divine justice flow upon the earth . . . by casting stones.”

Again, there was chaos.

“Adulteress!”

“This is what you deserve, you brazen hussy!”

“Liars! Liars! . . . What sin has she committed? . . . What crime?”

“Damn you, slut!”

“Quiet! . . . Quiet!”

“Are you not a Muslim, man?”

“An adulteress must be punished by stoning.”

“Who are the other two who claim to be witnesses? . . . Who are they?”

“The judgment is the judgment of Islam.”

“The blood of an innocent woman will taint and haunt you!”

“Fear this mother’s grief!”

The uproar grew frenzied. The cries and pleas blended in with the curses and insults . . . but the megaphone was the loudest . . .

“ . . . and given that the adulteress has neither confessed nor repented . . .”

She could even hear him breathe.

“The first stone must be cast by one of the witnesses.”

She didn’t know why the crowd suddenly grew quiet. She tore harder at the sheet. The dark grew denser and weighed down on her. Someone must have crouched down to pick up a rock. Saeed . . . or perhaps his brother. She didn’t know when they would hurl it at her. Her breath was trapped in her chest, she was afraid of making the slightest move.

“Listen carefully . . . After they throw the first stone, you are allowed to try to get out of the hole. Not before. You have to pull yourself out. Do you understand? With every bit of energy you have. No matter how. Struggle. Drag yourself out. The more time passes, the worse it will get, the more difficult it will be . . . they will keep throwing stones . . .”

Before they had taken her for the rite of repentance and ablution for the dead, Nargess had held her tight and again quickly repeated it all.

“If you manage to crawl out, it will all be over. Try as hard as you can. Drag yourself out of that damned hole. Do you understand what I am saying? . . . Are you listening to me?”

And suddenly a rock hit her on the forehead. Right on the bruise she had gotten in sleep. Her head snapped back and her forehead burst with pain and blood splattered. Her neck swung to the side and warm blood oozed over her eyes, trickled down the side of her nose and onto her lips.

“Pu—ll . . . your—self . . . o—ut! . . .”

There was mayhem, but the voices were now muted, indistinct.

The lobe of her nose started to itch, her lips quivered, and she tasted the saltiness of blood.

Nargess’s voice rang in her ears, repeating over and over again, “Pull yourself out! . . .”

And she suddenly came to. She twisted and turned her torso. She dug her toes deeper into the dirt, pushed up, and raised her chest. The uproar grew louder. She could hear her mother and sisters and all those standing farther away in the dark screaming and pleading for her to drag herself out of the pit.

“Come on, Mehri!”

“Come out, my Mehri!”

“Pull yourself out!”

“Try! . . . Hurry!”

“Pull yourself up . . .”

“Bravo . . . yes . . . try, my girl!”

“My child . . . my life . . . come, come on out!”

“You can do it! . . . come on . . . pull yourself out . . .”

Terrified and short of breath, she was silently sobbing and gasping for air. The sheet, wet with blood and steam from her mouth, clung to her face. But the voices she was hearing were giving her strength. She fought. She wriggled her waist and lifted her chest above the edge of the hole. She clambered up with her toes, dug her knees into the side of the pit, and tried to inch her way up. But it seemed darkness had grabbed onto her legs and would not let her climb out . . .

She had had this dream time and time again. The frenzied crowd, the first stone that hit her on the forehead. She had tried to scramble out of that dark pit, and in sleep and wakefulness, she had heard the roar of people shouting, “Pull yourself out! . . . Pull yourself out of that damned hole!”

She could hear them pleading.

“Come out, Mehri—i . . .”

Her toes dug into the dirt and her knees pressed against the hole.

“Hurry! . . . Get out! . . .”

She was now bending at the waist and pushing her chest over the edge of the pit.

“Quickly, girl! . . . You can do it! . . . Hurry!”

And she turned on one shoulder, used her elbow as a lever, and stabbed her knees into the pit’s belly. She shoved her feet back, inched her heels up the wall, and jerked her body higher. Her chest lay on the ground.

“Yes! . . . Yes! . . . Bravo! . . . Come on! . . .”

And the crowd cheered as she wrenched her shoulders left and right and crawled out on her stomach, sat on her knees, stood on one leg, limped forward, and ran . . . ran . . . faster . . . faster . .

.

When suddenly, another rock hit her right eye and her eyeball burst and her face crumpled and . . . she realized she was still in the pit.

And rocks rained . . .

And rocks rained . . .

Chapter 7

Mom screamed, “O God!” and she quickly blew out the kerosene lamp. There was darkness everywhere.

“Get up, Morteza! ... Hurry!”

The blare of the siren engulfed the apartment. Morteza’s heart was racing, and Mehri started to cry in her crib.

“Sweetheart, sweetheart ... don’t be scared, my dear ... come here, come in my arms ...”

Mom was in the kitchen when the news on the radio was suddenly interrupted and the announcer said, “Attention! Attention! The sound you are hearing is the emergency red alert signal ...” Morteza had heard the warning so many times that he knew it by heart. Silently, he repeated it with the broadcaster, “... an imminent airstrike. Immediately go to the nearest shelter.”

“Give me your hand ... Where are you?”

He abandoned his notebook and waved his pencil in the air. When it hit Mom’s leg, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up to his feet.

“Get up!”

And they felt their way to the front door. Mehri was in his mom’s arms and still crying. Mom let go of him, turned the doorknob, opened the door, and gripped his arm again as they walked out. The hallway and staircase were dark, too. The neighbors were all screaming and shouting as they made their way down to the basement.

His foot hit a slipper. He put it on and toed around with his other foot to find its mate ...

“Come on! ... What are you doing?”

Mom yanked his arm.

“My slippers!”

“You don’t need them ... come on!”

He quickly put on the other slipper and realized he had them on the wrong feet.

“Watch out! The stairs ... ” Mom warned.

He inched one foot forward until it reached the edge of the first step and he climbed down.

“Be careful! ... What’s that in your hand?”

He was still clutching his pencil. They carefully went down a few steps, turned on the dark landing, and again there were more stairs and more darkness and the blare of the siren that seemed to be gaining strength and growing louder. He heard the upstairs neighbors noisily following them. As he went down the next step, his shin hit a heavyset woman on the back. She was sitting down and groaning.

“Mrs. Faati, is that you?” Mom asked.

“My dear Nargess, go down this side. Oh, it’s pitch-black!”

And the woman shifted to one side to make way.

“Here ... My knees are weak, you go ahead. I’ll be along in a minute.”

Mom pulled him to herself, and Morteza blindly braced his elbow on Mrs. Faati’s fleshy shoulder to stop himself from falling, and he went down two more steps.

The roar of the siren was blasting out of every door that had been left ajar. It was as though war was raging in every home.

Cautiously, they continued down one step at a time. He heard the upstairs neighbor say to Mrs. Faati, “You can’t just sit here like this! ... Get up and make your way down.”

“I will, I will. You go ahead, Haji Agha. I’ll follow slowly.”

“Isn’t Mohammad home?”

“He’s at work. he has the night shift.”

“Ouch!” Mom yelped.

She seemed to have twisted her ankle and was about to fall on top of Morteza when they both grabbed onto the wall. Mom steadied herself and sat down.

“What happened, Mom?”

“Nothing, nothing ... Ouch! ... Give me your hand.”

The moment he moved, the ground suddenly gave way under his foot. One of his slippers came off and stayed behind on the top step.

Behind them, Haji Agha asked, “What happened, Mrs. Nargess? Did you fall?”

“No, I twisted my ankle ... Morteza!”

“I’ll bring him down,” Haji Agha said. “You go ahead ... Where are you, boy?”

The hand that was searching for him hit him on the head.

“Give me your hand ... Come on.”

And Haji Agha grabbed his thin arm.

“You go ahead, Missus. We’re almost there ... Be careful, the edges of the stairs are sharp.”

Morteza shifted his pencil to his other hand and wanted to say, My slipper! But he felt shy, and Haji Agha pulled him along.

They had climbed down a few more steps when the siren stopped. Now he could hear the commotion around him more clearly. His bare foot was cold. He was about to take off his other slipper when his shoulder hit the frame of the basement door and Haji Agha pulled him closer to himself. Now he could hear the drone from the boiler room. He held out his pencil in the dark and treaded forward. It was pitch-black everywhere, but he felt it was even darker in the basement.

They carefully took a few steps to the left and he knocked into one of the neighbors sitting next to the wall, and he thought to himself, Sorry!

They stopped and stayed there.

“Whoever is closer to the switch, turn on the light,” the sitting neighbor said.

It was Mr. Nader who lived on the first floor.

Morteza thought, Mr. Nader’s daughter-in-law always wears red lipstick. She must be there, too, sitting somewhere in the dark. He had once heard Mom tell Mrs. Shahi, “I think she’s pregnant. She’s looking pale.”

“Where’s the switch?” Mr. Samavat asked.

“Oh, wait ... It should be around here ...”

It was the young man who had recently moved in across from Mrs. Faati’s apartment.

“He moved here from Ahvaz,” Mrs. Faati had said. “He’s in university, studying petroleum engineering.”

Morteza didn’t know what that meant.

“Aha! Here it is. I found it.”

“Well, flip it on!”

There was a click, and then another click. And then, click, click ... click, click.

“I think the bulb has burned out.”

“Hey, buddy,” Amir’s dad said, “the bulb is fine, there’s no electricity.”

“It should have come back on by now,” Amir’s mom replied. “It must be four hours already.”

“Yes,” Mr. Nader said. “It’s past eight. The electricity was shut off at four.”

“How do you know it’s past eight?” Amir’s dad asked.

“Wasn’t the news on the radio when the siren went off?”

“Then I guess the bulb has burned,” Mr. Samavat said.

“Haji Saeed is the building manager.”

“Don’t bother ... It’ll only be a few more minutes. They’ll come, drop their bombs, and leave.”

It was Mr. Nader’s daughter-in-law. Her voice was shaking.

“I already told you a month ago,” Haji Saeed griped. “I don’t have time to run the building.”

“Doesn’t anyone have a radio?”

“I brought one, but I think the battery’s drained.”

“Does it take triple-As?”

Morteza heard someone gag and groan.

“Are you okay?” a woman asked.

“I feel nauseous.”

“Here,” someone said, “give her this handkerchief.”

“A handkerchief won’t help.”

“Stretch out your legs,” someone else said.

“Take deep breaths,” another advised.

He heard the scrunching of a paper bag.

“Here, this is clean. My medications were in it.”

He could hear Amir and his sister on the other side of the room quietly quarreling in the dark. Amir’s sister was saying, “I’m going to tell Mom ...”

“Go ahead, tell her!”

“I said, give it to me!”

Addressing the dark, Mr. Samavat asked, “Where’s Morteza’s father? Did he refuse to come downstairs again?!”

“What can I do? He doesn’t listen to me,” Mom answered. “And it gets worse when he drinks that filth.”

Mr. Samavat chuckled.

“He says, ‘You only die once! Which is better, to go quickly when a missile hits or get trapped under rubble?’”

“May God forbid!” Mr. Nader’s wife gasped.

Every night around that time, his dad would drink a glass of arak, stretch out on the floor and lean on a cushion in front of the television. If they had electricity, he would watch the news. Sometimes he would just fall asleep right there, and Mom would grumble under her breath in the kitchen and wash his glass a hundred times.

“Utter darkness! ... Utter darkness!”

Mrs. Faati had finally made it down to the basement. She was panting and muttering, “In the name of the holy ones, may God make Saddam suffer.”

“May God obliterate both leaders,” Mr. Nader said out loud.

“People say Saddam has declared that he will continue bombing our cities until the mullahs give in and consent to peace,” Amir’s mom said.

“My good sister, they will never give in. They’re even professing that war is a blessing!”

“Inflation and scarcity wasn’t enough, now we have bombs raining down on us.”

It was Mr. Samavat’s wife.

“Well, it must be a blessing for some,” Amir’s dad said.

Haji Agha seemed to have grown tired. He sat down on the floor.

“Where are Mr. Shahi and his family?” Mr. Samavat’s wife asked.

“They’ve gone north to the Caspian coast,” Mom answered.

“Do they have a villa there?” someone asked.

Mr. Nader’s wife suddenly said, “I know I’m obsessing again, but I can’t remember if I turned off the stove or not!”

“You turned it off, Missus! You turned it off!”

“I don’t think so!”

Then she pleaded, “Go and check!”

“In this dark?! ... The all-clear siren will go off any minute now.”

“You uncaring, selfish man,” she mumbled, and then grew quiet.

“Haji Saeed,” Mr. Samavat said, “where did you send your wife and kids?”

“They went to Imamzadeh Saleh.”

“Dad, I haven’t done any of my homework,” Amir said.

Morteza wanted to say, Me too. But he didn’t.

“We’ll get the all-clear soon,” Amir’s dad replied.

“Why haven’t they dropped their bombs yet!” the young man asked.

“Are you hoping they will?”

“I’m not going to school tomorrow,” Amir’s sister said.

“You wouldn’t dare,” her mom snapped.

Haji Agha took Morteza’s wrist and tugged at it.

“Sit!”

He squatted down.

Mehri started to cry again. He heard Mr. Samavat's wife quietly say to Mom, "Perhaps the poor innocent is hungry."

"Her bottle of sweet-water is upstairs. I panicked and forgot to bring it."

"Don't you breastfeed her?"

"I do, but here! ... It's not proper."

"It's pitch-black. No one will see."

A few seconds later, Mehri stopped crying.

"Not proper!? What nonsense! The poor child."

He heard a match being struck. Twice. Three times.

Someone shouted, "Don't light that, Mister! ... They'll see the glow in the window!"

"But Haji Saeed has nailed a blanket over it."

"What if there's a gap or a little opening ..."

"You don't need to light a match. So what if we have to wait another ten minutes!"

"They say the pilots can even see the tip of a lit cigarette from that distance. And they aim right at it."

"Ugh!"

The matchbox hit a wall and fell on the floor.

"It's another one of those nights ..." Mr. Nader sighed.

Suddenly they heard the terrifying thunder of antiaircraft artillery. The women and children screamed, and Mehri burst into tears again.

"Don't be afraid!" a few people shouted. "It's antiaircraft. Don't be afraid! ..."

Morteza was sitting in the dark, quaking with fright, as though someone were kicking him in the back.

Mr. Nader's daughter-in-law was shrieking the loudest. She sounded horror-stricken.

"Morteza!" his mom called out.

"Mom!" he cried. And he gripped the end of his pencil between his teeth and was halfway up to run toward her voice when Haji Agha swung his arm around his shoulders and held him down.

"He's with me, Mrs. Nargess. Don't worry."

And Haji Agha pulled him back and sat him down on his lap.

"Don't be scared ... it's nothing ..."

His heart was racing. He was biting his pencil and hard as he tried, he couldn't stop his legs from shaking.

Haji Agha put his big hands on his knees and hushed, "Don't be afraid ... don't be afraid ..."

"Dear, God!" Mr. Nader's wife groaned. "This girl has fainted!"

"Water ... water," Mrs. Faati called out. "Does anyone have water?"

Someone was slapping the girl's face to bring her to.

"Parvaneh! ... Parvaneh!"

The blast of the antiaircraft artillery stopped.

"They sound so terrifying," Mr. Samavat said. "The damn things sound like they're right on top of us!"

"You know," the young man said, "I think they're on the roof of the mosque."

Morteza was still trembling. Haji Agha stroked his legs and whispered, "Shhh ... don't be scared."

Then he held him closer and caressed his thighs ... and slowly slid his hand between his legs ... and his fingertips touched his willy!

Morteza's heart was pounding. He sat motionless, too afraid to move.

"Mmm ..."

There was commotion among the neighbors, but he couldn't hear them ...

Haji Agha played with his willy and little by little it got hard ... he stopped breathing ... his neck, his legs, his entire body seemed frozen ...

Suddenly there was a blast and the building shook.

"They dropped one!"

The antiaircraft artillery started up again and the women shrieked.

"This one was really close!"

"They must have hit the hospital."

He was shaking again ...

"I think it was in Gisha district."

Someone was puking ... puking ...

"Hold that paper bag under her mouth!"

The rumbling stopped. There was only the drone from the boiler room ...

Haji Agha took his wrist and slipped his trembling hand under the elastic waistband of his pants and laid it on his thing!

"Shhh ..."

He was scared ... it was so big ... he bit into his pencil ... bit into his pencil ...

"Mmm ..."

"Did you say it takes a triple-A battery?"

“Yes, those skinny ones.”

“Take out the battery and rub it on your shirt. It will recharge.”

“No, that won’t work. You have to drop it in boiling water.”

Haji was gripping his hand and slowly rubbing it on his thing ...

“Did they announce anything about coupons for cubed and granulated sugar?”

Something plastic fell on the floor with a clank ...

“They announced the cooking oil coupons this morning. Two hundred ninety-one. Four hundred grams per person.”

He heard the click of a battery being put into place ... the click of the radio knob ... fshhhh ... *“Eto Radio Moskva”* ... *“Mosta’mina al-keraam”*

The end of his pencil crushed between his teeth and tiny splinters of wood stuck to his tongue.

“Turn it to Tehran’s frequency.”

His mouth tasted bitter.

Haji Agha was squeezing his wrist and moving his hand over the tip of his thing ...

His fingers felt numb, his hand seemed paralyzed.

“Aa—h ...”

Haji Agha suddenly clenched his wrist tighter and his legs quivered ...

Something slimy oozed between Morteza’s fingers ...

The all-clear siren went off.

Chapter 8

Her fingertips were poking out of the dirt and could feel the heat of the sun.

The rest of her was buried under the rubble. She couldn't move. It seemed a steel beam had fallen across her middle pinning her down with the heaps of wood, metal, dirt, and mud bricks that had rained down on her. Her head was injured and wouldn't stop bleeding.

Down there, it was dark, as dark as the three veils of darkness. She was thirsty and had lost count of how many days and nights it had been since her lips last tasted water. There was someone near the burned acorn tree holding a piece of local bread. She could smell it ... but the tree no longer smelled of acorns. The mice showed up again. Her legs were numb, but she could tell they were biting her toes. Two of them, nibbling fast.

She was sleepy ... Last night she had again dreamed that the Bisotun monument on the mountain had ruptured, and she had jolted awake.

“Mehri—i!”

It was Morteza. He was still searching for her.

When the ground started to shake and the walls cracked, she had run toward the door, terrified ...

She wanted to scream, I'm here, Morteza! Down here! But she couldn't make a sound.

There were a few people a short distance away, smoking in silence. They were probably looking down, staring at the ground under their feet. One of them spat.

She heard Amir's motorcycle going in circles nearby. Poor Amir ... Sometime in 1988 he was martyred at the front. He was nineteen. His throat was slashed with a wire in the dark of night while he was on guard duty.

Amir stopped the motorcycle next to the trash can and walked toward the ruins ... His clothes smelled of hashish and metal! There was a cold metal object tucked in his jacket!

She shivered. Her sense of smell had sharpened and she could detect scents a hundred times more than before. She inhaled deeply ... It wasn't the smell of a knife.

Marjan walked past the remains of the house with an empty basket. It must have been morning; the sun had risen and people were out and about. Or perhaps it was a brisk October afternoon and the clouds had cleared.

A few ruins over, a woman was moaning and crying. She reeked of soured milk. She could barely hear her sobs. What if it was Nargess! Then she remembered that Nargess was hanged in prison two years ago. She listened intently ... Then she sniffed. There was no scent of her two-month-old baby either.

Her stomach cramped with pain. She was hungry.

The meatballs were simmering on the stove and she was waiting for Morteza to come home from work. She was sitting next to the samovar, in front of the television and lost in thought when the earth shook and the lamp above her swayed and the wall behind the television cracked all the way up to the edge of the ceiling, and *sh-sh-sh-shhh* ... She leaped up in a panic and was hurled to the floor. There was a roar and the lights went out. She got up again and raced to the door. She grabbed onto the door frame sideways, stepped out, and had made it down the first few steps when the roof collapsed on top of her.

"They want to put the loader to work," one of the men said.

And the pungent smell of cigarettes wafted down under the wreckage.

"Yes," another replied. "They want to start it up ... It's time."

"There's no one else alive."

“No,” someone else said. “No one else alive.”

She thought, when the earth shook, the stove must have burst into flames and the pot tipped over, spilling the meatballs on the floor.

“Hai ali al-salaat ... Make haste to prayer ...”

The crackling chant of Azan rose from the mosque’s speakers. She didn’t know if it was a call to morning or evening prayers.

Her mouth was full of dirt, gagging her. She spat, and her tongue felt even more parched. It felt like a chunk of scorched wood and tasted of the desert.

“A pile of dirt! ... The citadel of Bam has turned into a pile of dirt!”

It was Grandfather’s voice! Mrs. Dini was adding the high and low accents to an Arabic verse on the blackboard with colored chalk when the school supervisor called her and said she should go home early that day ... In the alley, when she heard someone reciting the Quran out loud, she realized Grandfather had died. Then she saw his photograph framed with a black ribbon posted on the streetlamp.

“Hai ali al-salaat ... ”

Her head was injured and wouldn’t stop bleeding.

A dirt worm slowly slithered up onto her forehead. It crept over her eyebrow and onto her eyelid and curled its way down the side of her nose ... She opened her chapped lips a little. The worm wriggled above them and slid into her mouth. She wanted to close her mouth ... but she couldn’t. And she stopped feeling the worm.

A voice gently said, “Wake up, Grandfather ... Wake up ...”

Her ears were clogged with dirt, muffling the sound ... Then, the smell of tobacco drifted away ...

There was no sensation in her other hand that was buried in the dirt. It felt as though it had been severed and laid lifeless next to her. She tried to move it ... It wasn't there!

“Mommy Mehr—i!”

It was Morteza. He was still searching for her.

She thought, he has grown up so much. When the earthquake hit he was eight years old and now his is twenty-something, or perhaps thirty-something.

Her nipples had hardened from the cold. The chill of the desert sears into the bones, especially at night, especially in January. She remembered she wasn't wearing a bra. Going to bed, she had looked at Morteza's closed eyes as he slept in the corner of the room, then she took off her bra, tucked it under her pillow, and lay down exhausted.

She panicked. What if one of her breasts peeks through the tear in her nightgown when they dig her out from under the rubble?

“Mo—mmy! ...”

When the earth shook, Morteza's terrified cry had jolted her awake and in the dim light from the window she had seen the gleam in his gapping eyes. He had thrown aside his quilt but remained half-sitting, frozen in horror. Then the earth roared and *sh-sh-sh-shhh...* A segment of the roof collapsed and she no longer saw Morteza.

She could hear scattered groups of people near the cemetery returning from funerals and prayer ceremonies for the dead. No one was mourning out loud anymore. The men were quiet, scuffing their heels along with the whiff of opium. Some were surely carrying candles, or perhaps lanterns. The women followed, their chadors smelling of rosewater.

“May God bless and absolve their souls,” one woman muttered. “There’s no room left in the cemetery.”

“God bless their souls,” another repeated.

The scent of halva and saffron filled her head ...

“You can still hear the sound of moans coming from the ruins,” a man said.

“There’s no one alive ... Not after all these years.”

Her fingertips sticking out of the dirt were freezing. Hopefully, Morteza has dressed warm and won’t catch a cold again.

She smelled a cat nearby. It slowly circled above her ... and sat next to her hand. She could sense its warmth. It sniffed at her fingers one by one and licked the cut on her hand. Its tongue was hot.

She remembered she had not washed the dishes that night. Morteza had gone to see off the guests and their political debates. She was so tired that she piled up the pots and pans and dropped down on the bed half-naked. Waiting for Morteza, she picked up *Darkness* from under the bed to read chapter eight: “ ... she was lying down and playing with her earring as she turned the page when the bed started to shake.” She paused! “Morteza was standing in the doorway watching her with a foaming toothbrush in his mouth when the house shook ...” The house shook and the damp, white walls cracked all the way to the edge of the gabled ceiling ... The book fell from her hand and she leaped up, but was hurled to the floor and the wooden beams came crashing down on her.

Her head was injured and wouldn’t stop bleeding ...

“Mehr—i! ...”

It was Morteza. He was still searching for her.

“I’m here, Morteza!” she screamed. “Down here! ...”

And no one heard her.

She was buried under heaps of dirt and rubble, but she no longer felt their weight.

The June air was hot and humid. Then the breeze brought with it the scent of olives from Roudbar. It blew on the palm of her hand. It was cool and pleasant. It made her think of the windmills that slowly turned ... She thought, if only that wild wind from Manjil would blow and heave all the rocks and planks of wood off of her and into the sky ... A rainstorm came and wet her fingers. Water seeped through the crevices in between the broken beams, mud bricks, and cement blocks and wet her silk nightgown.

With her tongue she drew a bit of the wet dirt into her mouth and sucked its water to quench her thirst. Then she spat out the grits and granules, and spat again. Her mouth tasted like weeds and algae.

There was a wedding in the neighborhood. She could hear the commotion and celebration. The men’s breath smelled of arak as they stood watching the Ghassem-abadi folk dance of the girls. Someone was singing a local song. “*Ra’na ti toman gele kesheh! ... Ra’na! ...*”

In her mind she said out loud, “Ra’na!”

The cat left her hand and followed the smell of the fish and the basket away. She realized Marjan was still not talking to Nargess, and had therefore not gone to her daughter’s wedding. Then she heard a group of men gathered under an arch and puffing on Homa cigarettes.

One of them said, “A lot of people died the year the earthquake hit.”

“Yes, a lot,” another replied. “Thousands and thousands.”

She craved a cigarette.

“And many committed suicide,” someone else added. “Do you remember Amir?”

“Yes, I remember him. ... Many ... It’s hard to lose your entire family and be the only one left alive.”

The trace of the earth worm on her face still itched. She wanted to raise her hand ... but it wasn’t there.

It had been a few days since the noise of excavating the ruins had stopped. Now and then, she only heard the hopeless sound of a shovel or a pickaxe in the distance.

A car arrived and a crowd gathered around a man who smelled of Tea Rose cologne, and everyone kept saying, “Mr. Mayor, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Saiidi ...”

She wanted to sneeze.

The scent of Tea Rose wafted this way and that and pulled the crowd along its trail.

“Why don’t you get started, Engineer?” the mayor asked. “It’s been ten days. There are no more survivors.”

“No, Mr. Mayor!” someone shouted. “It’s only been eight days!”

“What difference does it make? ... Engineer, start up the loaders!”

“Please, Mr. Saiid! Please!” a few men pleaded. “We beg you! Implore you!... Don’t do it! ... Sir, there are still people down there! Alive!”

“My wife is under the rubble!” Morteza shouted. “Mehri is still under the rubble!”

The men smelled of sweat and fatigue.

“For the love of God, Mr. Mayor!” someone else cried. “Have mercy!”

And their voices got lost in the folds of the commotion.

In a loud voice and deliberate tone, the mayor said, “I assure you, there is no one left alive down there.”

She sneezed.

The clamor grew louder. She could hear Morteza's hoarse voice as he yelled, "You have no right! ... Mehri is still under the wreckage! ... You have no right!"

Marjan was standing nearby. She could smell the gold around her neck. She quietly said, "Let's go Saiid. It's none of our business. Let's go."

She heard a gunshot far away. *Amir!*

For a moment there was silence.

"We are going to build a large shopping center here," the mayor said. "For your benefit. Like the Plasco building. Several floors. With a carpark. Plenty of boutiques and stores filled with foreign brand name merchandise ... This area will be booming ..."

She smelled urine, and then heard footsteps above her. Right over her head! Then a man's hand took her hand! Her breath froze in her chest. The hand was warm. She thought, He's going to shout, Over here! There's someone over here! ... She's alive! ... And people will come running and Morteza will shove them aside and call out to her, Mehr—i! Then they will dig through the heaps of wreckage and sunlight will hurt her eyes and hands will pull her out from under the dirt ...

The man grabbed her finger and pulled on her ring! Her finger had swollen and the ring wouldn't come off. He pulled harder, twisted her finger, but the ring didn't come off. The man pressed and bent her finger, and her finger broke! ... And he took off the ring.

It grew quiet everywhere.

She felt no pain.

She felt sleepy.

It was dark down there, as dark as the three veils of darkness.

Then came the sound of the loaders ...

Chapter 9

The moment the doorbell rang, the woman nervously said, “Go back there!”

He leaped up on the pile of bedding stacked in the back of the room, squeezed in behind it, and the woman threw a few blankets and pillows on top of him. And she said, “Don’t move!”

His back was against the wall and his face was pressed against the mattresses and quilts. It was pitch black. He straightened his right leg a little to ease his backache.

When the woman opened the door to the front yard, cold and snow gusted in with the whistle of the wind.

“Get rid of them somehow!” he said in a hushed voice.

The door remained ajar and the protracted peel of the bell rang out again. Several people started kicking and pounding on the metal door. The baby woke up from the noise, or perhaps from the cold, and started to cry. He couldn’t understand why the woman was taking so long. The street door was no more than a few steps away across the yard. He thought if she didn’t hurry, they would certainly grow suspicious and find him. With some effort, he slightly raised his elbow, turned his wrist, shoved the muzzle of the Colt between two mattresses, and aimed at the door he could not see.

They were still banging on the door, the baby was crying, the wind was howling, and now he could hear shouting out on the street. The woman finally opened the door and he heard a few men tear into the small yard yelling, “Where did he go? ... Which way did he escape? ... You, go up there! ...”

There were several voices, he couldn’t tell how many. And the frightened woman was saying, “What’s going on? ... Oh, my God! Who? ...”

“Sister, there was someone on your rooftop. He jumped into yard, didn’t he?”

“No! Who? ... I didn’t see anyone.”

“Sister, put on your headscarf!”

“Oh, of course.”

“Where did he go? Did you see him?”

“No! ... Who? I saw no one.”

One of the men said, “Haji Agha, I think it was that other rooftop!”

“Run! ... No, Saeed, you stay here.”

Their voices moved away.

A moment later, the woman came back into the room and closed the door. The voices faded and the icy wind stopped.

“Shhh ... Shhh ...”

The baby quieted down.

“Did they leave?” he whispered from behind the bedding.

“Shhh!”

He thought she was still hushing the baby to sleep, and in a louder voice asked, “Did they leave?”

“Hush! One of the Revolutionary Guards is still here.”

He kept quiet for a moment and then whispered, “Where? In the yard?”

“Yes,” the woman said quietly. “He’s outside the door.”

“How many were they?”

“I don’t know. Three, four ... They went up on the roof.”

“They will probably come back.”

He straightened his leg a little more and his knee started to burn again.

“Can you see him? Why did you take so long to open the door?! They’re probably suspicious now.”

“Shush! ... He’s looking in through the window ... You left footprints on the snow!”

He kept quiet. He wondered how he could have overlooked his trail.

The woman took the lid off the pot on the stove and stirred the food.

“What did you do?”

“I smoothed them over with the snowplow.”

When he leaped down from the roof into the yard, he twisted his ankle and landed on his knee. Now the cut was burning.

“When is your husband coming home?”

“I don’t know ... at sundown ... maybe.”

“What if they don’t leave by then?”

The woman didn’t answer. The aroma of the fresh herbs in the simmering stew drifted behind the heap of beddings.

“Are you cold?” the woman asked. “Do you want me to turn on the kerosene heater?”

“No ... but I think the baby was cold. Did she fall asleep?”

“Yes.”

The woman hesitated a moment and then asked, “Are you with the Mujahedin?”

“No. I’m with the People’s Fedai Guerrillas.”

The woman was silent for a while and then said, “I’ve stopped praying, too. It’s been a few months ... I don’t know ...”

Her voice was soft and sad.

“How about your husband? Is he religious?”

The woman said nothing.

His pants felt wet against his knee. He didn't know whether it was blood or melted snow.

“The guard outside, is he armed?”

“Wait ...”

She tapped the ladle against the rim of the pot a few times.

“Yes. He has a rifle slung over his shoulder.”

“A G3?”

“I think so. Those big ones are G3s?”

He tightened his grip on the Colt. His fingers were starting to numb. He gently wriggled them ...

There was silence. He wondered how long he would have to stay back there.

“You're cooking spicy fish stew?”

“You're from the south?”

“No,” he chuckled. “I'm from the Bakhtiari tribe.”

“Are you hungry?”

She sounded concerned.

“No.”

His nose was itching. He rubbed it against a mattress.

“A little.”

“The past few nights, I've been hearing gunshots nonstop.”

“They've stepped up the round ups and arrests.”

“Are you ... armed?” the woman asked warily.

He wanted to say, No.

He heard the Revolutionary Guard knock on the glass panel in the door with something, perhaps with the tip of his G3.

“What should I do?” the woman asked with panic in her voice.

“Don’t let him in!”

The woman opened the door a crack and the stubborn, howling wind blew in.

“Sorry, Sister ... it’s really cold out here ... I was wondering if ... if it’s all right for me to come inside for a few minutes?”

“But ... well ... there’s nothing going on in here.”

“I know there’s nothing going on in here. But it’s really cold out there. I’m freezing.”

“But, I’m ... I mean ... the baby might wake up.”

“My hands are ice cold.”

The guard’s voice became more distinct. He had let himself in.

“Phew! I’ll just warm up for a few minutes and go back out.”

His voice moved closer ...

He heard the man briskly rub his hands together.

The woman closed the door and the wind stopped.

“Sister, I’m sorry for coming in with my boots on. I’ll just stand here so that I don’t dirty your kilim.”

“It’s all right,” she said quietly.

“Might of God, it’s been snowing nonstop since last night.”

The woman said nothing.

“I think it’s running out of kerosene. The flames are burning a little yellow ... I saw the kerosene container in the corner of the yard. If there’s any left in it, I’ll take the heater out and fill it up.”

“It’s empty.”

“It’s winter, you can’t go without kerosene ... Is the shop far?”

“No ... The twenty-liter container is too heavy for me to carry.”

There was a moment of silence. Then he heard a tea glass and saucer clinking.

“They must have caught him by now.”

“If that’s for me, please don’t add any water ... I don’t think so.”

And the guard added, “It’s a good thing I didn’t go with the others for no good reason.”

He wondered why the guard said this.

“They were two. We caught the girl near their house. She had a stack of the leftists’ leaflets hidden under her coverall.”

His heart started to race. Nargess! ...

“How old was she?” the guard wondered out loud. “Sixteen, seventeen?”

He had looked up at the second-floor window. The curtains were drawn and there was no sign of the flowerpot. He was thinking that perhaps Mehri had just arrived home or had forgotten to put the flowerpot behind the window to signal that all was well, but then he saw a Revolutionary Guard peering over the edge of the roof. He had quickly put the car in reverse, slammed down on the gas, and sped out of the alley. He turned onto the main street and continued driving. Then he abandoned the Peykan in a side street and ran into a maze of winding, narrow roads. When he found himself trapped in a dead-end alley, he leaped up on a wall and pulled himself onto a rooftop, and ...

He thought, But Nargess is twenty-five!

His nose was itching again. He didn't know whether he was allergic to the down in the pillows or to the cotton fill in the quilts. He wanted to sneeze. He crumpled his face to stop himself. Then he slowly turned his hand and scratched his nose with the tip of the Colt.

"These insurgents ... Why are the walls so damp? Look, the moisture stain comes all the way up to here ... I mean the anti-revolutionaries. With God's help, we're getting rid of them. We're tracking them down house by house. No matter what hole they crawl into, we'll find them ... Thank you for your trouble ..."

From the guard's voice he could tell the man was now sitting on the floor. He must have left his rifle leaning against the wall, or he might have set it down next to him.

"As soon as they set foot in prison, they either repent and become *tavaabs* and cooperate with the government, or they end up in front of the firing squad. And good riddance."

He could hear a sugar cube crunching in the man's mouth.

"And whoever helps them or hides them will be considered a collaborator, Sister ... Unless they turn them in. It was the neighbors who turned in the guerrilla fighter we're after. They said they had seen suspicious comings and goings for a while. Of course, it was a team house. The neighbors said sometimes they would see them taking boxes and boxes of stuff out of a Peykan and carrying them into the house. Obviously, fliers and leaflets ... We had the house under surveillance for several days."

He paused.

"By the way ..."

He slurped his tea.

"... the snowplow was in the middle of the yard!"

He paused.

“I wanted to pick it up and stand it against the wall, but I thought I should ask you first.”

The woman said nothing.

“I was surprised. It was just lying there in the middle of the yard.”

The silence grew heavier. He sensed the guard eyeing the heap of beddings. He squeezed the grip of the Colt and slowly released the safety with his thumb. And in that darkness, he blindly aimed at the man’s face.

“I was about to plow the snow when you all showed up and wouldn’t stop ringing the doorbell ...”

“Oh, I see ... then that’s why there was no snow on the plow.”

He chuckled.

“First ... first, I was going to break the ice on the shallow pool ... you saw it ... it’s frozen.”

“Is it? I didn’t notice.”

And then, he added, “It’s strange that I didn’t notice it. I’m usually ... I mean ... I’m usually very observant.”

“Have you finished your tea?”

Her tone suggested, It’s time for you to leave.

“Thank you for your trouble, I’ve really warmed up.”

One of his legs had fallen asleep and he felt his sprained ankle had swollen. He was breathing slowly and silently. He wanted to move his leg a little, but he was too afraid.

“You’re wearing black. May God have not brought you ill.”

“The first anniversary of my father’s passing is coming soon,” the woman said quietly.

“May he rest in peace ... let us say a prayer for the dead and praise God the merciful ...”

And the Revolutionary Guard started to pray under his breath.

He knew that as the man recited the prayer, his eyes were scrutinizing every corner of the room.

And the woman kept quiet.

“Whose photo is that on the mantelpiece?”

“That’s my husband.”

“Really?! When I saw you dressed in black, I thought perhaps you’re a widow. What does he do?”

“He’s a teacher. That photo is from when he was at the front.”

“Aaa! But he wasn’t a soldier. He looks like he was about forty years old.”

“He was sent by the school to serve with the support personnel behind the lines.”

He sensed the woman had a lump in her throat.

“Where was he assigned to?”

The woman hesitated, and then said, “The south.”

“Where? Fakkeh, Havizeh, Sussangerd? I’ve been to all of them ... Sardasht, Marivaan ...”

“Marivaan,” the woman said.

“Huh! ...”

“May God grant him long life,” the guard said a moment later.

There was silence.

“You look very young. One wouldn’t think you have a child.”

The woman blew hard, twice, and the samovar stopped gurgling.

“What’s your name?”

He asked abruptly. And his tone was no longer reserved and polite. The woman was probably looking down, staring at the patterns on the kilim ...

He thought of leaping out from behind the bedding and holding the Colt up to the man's face ...

He squeezed the pistol's grip harder to stop his hand from shaking with anger.

"Do you have children?" the woman asked.

"Four."

And the guard laughed.

"The oldest is eighteen."

He was feeling hot. With every breath, he felt steam rising from the open collars of his shirt and overcoat.

"The man you're after, is he with the Mujahedin?"

He knew she was trying to distract the guard.

"No. He's a guerilla fighter. One of those communists ... You know, the ones who, God forbid, don't believe in God!"

Then, he added, "You haven't seen him, have you?"

"No!" the woman shot back.

He heard something clicking. It wasn't the sound of a breechblock. It was the sound of something being fiddled with ... perhaps a rifle's magazine being loaded.

"A while back, we were after one of them ... seven, eight months ago. He slipped through our fingers twice. The first time, we had surrounded the entire area. The rascal jumped over the wall into a neighbor's house and walked out wearing a chador. No one suspected him ... The

second time, we arrested him in the middle of the night and were driving him off when he threw himself out of the car and disappeared in the dark! ... With handcuffs on!”

The woman was probably stunned and gaping at the man. Or perhaps, frightened.

“This food smells so good! What is it?”

“Fresh herb stew.”

He was hungry. His stomach was starting to growl.

“Then what happened?”

“It’s a long story ... The guy’s mother was sick. We knew that sooner or later he would show up to see her. One day at the crack of dawn, the guys radioed, ‘He’s here!’ ... When we raided the house, his mother cried and swore up and down that he wasn’t there ...”

“Perhaps the poor woman was telling the truth.”

Her voice was shaking. She sounded sad.

“She was lying.”

“She was lying?!”

“Of course, she was. Do you know where he was hiding? In the cellar, behind a pile of odds and ends and junk.”

The guard chuckled and slapped the heap of bedding, perhaps with the back of his hand.

He held his breath and aimed the Colt directly in the direction of the sound.

The baby woke up and started to cry.

“Shhh ...”

The woman must have picked her up to try and put her back to sleep.

“Shhh ...”

“Oh, by the way ... Marivaan is not in the south ... It’s in Kurdistan.”

The woman started hushing the child faster ...

“Am I right?”

“I told you the truth.”

The baby suddenly stopped crying. He realized she was breastfeeding her.

“I know you told the truth,” the guard said gently. “I’m sure you told the truth.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then he softly said, “Now, why have you turned your back to me?”

He imagined the man was now grinning ... with the corners of his mouth curled up ...

“N-no ... no ... ,” the woman stammered.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“N-no ... s-stop ...”

Her voice was cracking.

For an instant, he thought of leaping out. But he knew he would have only a few seconds.

By the time he pushed away the quilts and mattresses, the guard would have grabbed his rifle and

...

He turned the Colt in the direction of the man’s voice ... He hesitated. He moved it slightly to the left. And he aimed at darkness.

“Yes ... yes ... I know you told the truth ...”

“No ... no ... please,” the woman begged.

“The guys will be back soon ...”

His voice was growing softer and softer.

“Are you listening?”

It was as if the guard was speaking to him.

“And afterwards, I will leave ...”

Now he could hear the man’s breaths.

“You didn’t tell me your name ...”

He clenched his teeth in rage. His hand was shaking even more. He was afraid he would miss.

The woman quietly said, “Mehri.”

“Mehri ... mmm ... *so* beautiful ... ”

He did not hear the woman say, No. Perhaps for his sake ...

He pulled the trigger.

And the baby shrieked.

Chapter 10

“Why are you locking the door?” she asked.

“It’s dark in here. Are you afraid?” Marjan said.

“But there’s a ‘*do not enter*’ sign on the door!”

And she thought, Why hasn’t Morteza come?

“It’s the rule, Sweet-thing. The door must be locked from the inside.”

She turned and looked at the dark door.

“So that ...”

“So that if a Sweet-thing suddenly gets it into her head to leave, she won’t be able to. And, it has to be a lock that opens with a key.”

Marjan pressed the key against her face. “One of these,” she chuckled.

“And, I should put it in my pocket so I won’t lose it. We don’t have much time. Long-legs said we have to return the key before eleven.”

They called the short woman in charge of the darkroom Long-legs.

“But it’s already ten thirty!”

“And I had to really rub her balls for her to give me the key.”

She was taken aback by Marjan’s juvenile, macho tone.

“It’s so hot in here!” Marjan said. “Let me first hang up my chador over there ... You should get rid of your coverall and headscarf.”

“No,” she said. “I’m fine.”

The scent of the chador waved past her face and remained suspended in the dark.

“You’re fine!? I’ve got sweat dripping down the crack of my ass ... Oh, I’m *so* rude! ...

Hand me the rolls of film.”

She loosened her headscarf. “No, I’ll do it myself.”

“You’re too cute! You know how?”

“I’ve done it once before.”

“Love your *doing*! Just don’t screw it up.”

She was embarrassed. Marjan was being crude. She ignored her comment, put her bag down on the floor, and took a crumpled-up paper bag out of her coverall pocket.

“How many are there?” Marjan asked.

“Two 35mm’s.”

The bag scrunched as she took out one of the rolls.

“Look, Sweet-thing, first run your hand over here, on top of the table,” Marjan said.

“That’s it. Now arrange everything you need side by side. And remember what you put where.”

They were standing with their shoulders touching. She rolled up the paper bag again, placed it on the left corner of the table, and put the second roll of film next to it.

She thought, I wish Morteza would get here.

“They’re all photos of the dormitory?” Marjan asked.

Morteza had told her that the plainclothes Revolutionary Guards were arresting the students one after the other and putting handcuffs on them, but by then he no longer had his camera to take more photographs. A few of the guards had gone after him, and while cursing and beating him, they had dragged him down from the dormitory rooftop and out into the campus yard. And ignoring his broken ribs, they had forced him to lie face down on the ground next to the others.

“The dormitory and the campus yard,” she answered.

She was groping around the table ...

“There may be a few of the street, too. From when the guys set fire to the trashcan. Where are the scissors?”

Marjan took her hand and moved it down the front of the table. “In this drawer. Open it. All the supplies are in there.”

The drawer was stuck. She forced it open and felt around for the scissors ... They weren’t there.

“They arrested a lot of students. About two hundred.”

“They say two hundred, but the numbers are higher.”

“Definitely. But, what do you need scissors for?”

“This thing ... I need to open it.”

“Give it to me, Sweet-thing!”

She felt Marjan’s hand on her elbow. It slid down her forearm and took the roll of film from her hand.

She smelled darkness. Morteza hadn’t come.

“D’you haf inny ewz ov Amir?”

“He’s still in prison. Solitary confinement! ... What’re you doing?”

“Opining it viz ma teet.”

“You’re going to ruin your teeth! You’ll chip them!”

There was everything in the drawer, except scissors.

“You said ruin and it made me think of that friend of yours, the one with the thick lips. How is she?”

“I don’t see Nahid all that often.”

She found them. “Here they are!”

“I already opened it, Sweet-thing.” And Marjan handed her the film spool.

She had to be careful. She held the sharp edges of the film between her fingertips and cut the corners at the tip diagonally so they wouldn’t get caught in the developing tank reel. Then she said, “Take these, don’t open the other one with your teeth!”

And she held out the scissors to Marjan.

She didn’t take them. “Wait. The tank is small. Let’s roll this one first.”

She set the scissors down on the table. “I’ll roll it myself.”

She wanted to do everything herself ... She had smeared dirt on her face, put on a men’s shirt and cap, and using one of the guy’s ID card she had entered the boys’ dormitory and taken stairs right up to the rooftop. She had found the rolled-up sock under the cooler unit, ran downstairs and out of the campus yard panting. She was on the street when she realized her hair had come loose and was showing from behind.

“Sweet-thing, lost in thought!?”

She was distracted. She took the tank reel from Marjan, lodged the tip of the film in it, turned its sides in opposite directions, and slowly wound the film around it.

Marjan pressed tighter against her and gently tugged on her long hair and said, “Don’t rush.”

Marjan’s body smelled of sweat and perfume. She thought to herself, in that long sleeve shirt, it’s normal for her to be hot.

She heard the rustle of the paper bag.

“Here, cut the end.”

She took the scissors from Marjan and snipped off the tip of the second filmstrip.

“I saw your performance,” Marjan said. “I didn’t recognize you under all that makeup.”

“The play was a bit weak.”

“You were good. I didn’t know you can play the role of that kind of a woman, too.”

“What kind of a woman!?”

There wasn’t much room. Marjan accidentally stepped on her toes.

“Oh, I’m sorry ... Did I hurt you?”

“No. Why do you always wear boots? And with a chador!?”

“I love these combat boots.”

She paused. “They’re Yasser’s.”

Her voice was dark.

“They’re a bit too big for me.”

“Yasser is the one who was martyred?”

“Yea.”

Marjan gently pressed her shoulder against hers ...

“You weren’t so shy up on the stage.”

And she hooked her pinky finger around hers.

“Was Yasser the older one?” she asked.

And she slowly pulled her hand away.

“No, the older one is Mohammad. From my dad’s first marriage. He’s fifty-three, fifty-four. His daughter is two months younger than me.”

She laughed.

“Your dad is a mullah, and he named you Marjan? They usually name their daughters Fatemeh or Zahra, or some religious name, Arabic.”

“We have Fati and Zahra, too,” Marjan said laughing. “My name on my birth certificate is Mehdiéh, but they call me Marjan at home. Mom says during the Shah’s time my dad was in love with an actress called Marjan.”

“Which one was she?”

“The one with the big ass.”

She couldn’t remember her.

“Mine is flat. Touch it.”

Marjan took her hand and put it on her behind.

She pulled back and was about to say something when she heard a noise outside.

Morteza had been anxious that night. He had gone to bed with his camera hanging around his neck and worrying about Amir. Most of the students had returned to the dormitory and gone to their rooms. A few were still scattered outside on the lawn studying with their tea flasks next to them ... In the middle of the night when he heard the ruckus, Morteza ran out with his camera and photographed everything he saw. Plainclothes Revolutionary Guards and special forces had raided the dormitory. They were hollering and cursing, breaking down doors, shattering windows, burning books and papers, and beating up the students.

Her heart was racing.

“Where’s the tank? Hand it to me.”

She felt hot. She pushed her headscarf slightly back to air her hair a little.

Marjan moved the developing tank closer to her hand. “Here.”

She took it, put the reel in, and closed the lid.

“The developer chemistry is here.”

She blindly moved her hand forward and felt the plastic container with the back of her fingers and picked it up by its handle. Then she ran her index finger over the tank's lid and found its hole. She carefully poured the liquid into it.

"Pour all of it," Marjan said.

"I did."

She knew she now had to wait three or four minutes.

"I'm dying for a cigarette," Marjan said.

The smell of a cigarette that wasn't there whirled in her head.

"You don't smoke at all?"

"No."

"Half the kids in your dormitory are smoke-heads."

"I'm not in the dormitory anymore."

She closed the opening on the tank's lid.

"Did you know even thinking about a cigarette makes you smell one?" Marjan said.

And she sniffed a few times. "Don't you smell it?"

"No," she said, but she did. She wondered why the smell of cigarette smoke was whirling in her head and wouldn't go away.

"Liar! ... Not even a little?"

"Well ... maybe a little."

"Think of coffee and it'll go away," Marjan said.

She could suddenly smell coffee.

"Now you're in a gas station ..."

The sharp odor of gasoline filled the darkness and the smells blended ... Then, again, there was the whiff of cigarette smoke.

“It’s no use, I can still smell cigarettes!”

“I think you’ve turned into a smoke-head, too!” Marjan said laughing. “Or maybe it’s the effect of the tear gas.”

“Were you in the riots and demonstrations, too?”

“Nope,” Marjan replied.

“Really?”

“You all wanted reforms and tailed the ass of Their Holinesses. I already have a fat one at home.”

“I didn’t vote. Morteza didn’t either.”

“Prove it! Show me your finger.”

Marjan took her finger and pulled it up to her face.

“Let me see if it tastes of ink.” And she licked her finger.

She wanted to laugh, and tried to pull her hand away, but Marjan was clenching it tight.

“With this finger ... you can do things that are a lot more fun, Sweet-thing.”

Marjan again put her finger in her mouth and gently sucked it.

“Stop it, Marjan!”

The girl’s mouth was hot.

“Stop it!” she said raising her voice. And she yanked her hand away.

She could feel the wetness on her finger.

“Let’s hope there are a few nudie pics, too ... Huh?”

She said nothing and quietly wiped her finger on her coverall.

The darkness had grown dank.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Marjan griped.

She heard something. It sounded like Marjan was tapping two fingers on a soft pack of cigarettes to make one pop up. And then she pulled it out.

“A—ah! ...”

She wondered how many minutes had passed.

Then she suddenly heard the flick of a lighter.

“What are you doing?” she shouted. And without seeing, she clawed at the dark to snatch the lighter away. It flew out of Marjan’s hand, hit the wall, and fell into the dark.

“You want to ruin the photographs?”

“How fierce!”

“Don’t you know the slightest bit of light will burn the negatives?!”

“There was no lighter fluid left in it, Sweet-thing.”

She was frustrated. She needed fresh air. She unbuttoned her coverall, then ran her hand over the table searching for the second roll of film. It wasn’t there.

She felt around again.

She had asked a few friends, “Is this girl really trustworthy?” And except for one person, they had all said, “Yes ... ignore the chador she wears ...”

“I heard she once got into a scuffle with a guy in the darkroom!”

And Morteza had said, “She’s the one who developed Amir’s photos for his show. They were all nudies, and she didn’t breathe a word about it. In any case, you can’t develop these films anywhere else. No matter where you go, you’ll get caught.”

And she had asked, “What are nudies?”

“Nudies are photographs of naked people,” Morteza had answered laughing.

“But these photos are different, Morteza,” she had said quietly.

“Did you take the other roll?” she asked.

“Nope,” Marjan answered.

“Give it to me, Marjan! Stop teasing.”

“I didn’t take it, Sweet-thing. You have it.”

“I put it here ... right here.”

“Wait ...”

Marjan threw her arms around her from behind and ran her hands down over her pant pockets.

“What’s this, Sweet-thing? ... Here it is!”

“That’s my lipstick.”

With her arms still clamped around her, Marjan pushed four fingers into her pocket.

“And she’s wearing tight jeans,” she murmured. “... makes me horny.”

Her hand moved all the way down to her thighs, between her legs.

“Marjan!”

She managed to swivel around and tried to free herself.

Marjan tugged the lipstick out of her pocket. They were now standing face to face. She felt Marjan’s hot breath on her face as she threw her arm around her neck and with her other hand smeared lipstick on her lips.

She said nothing. Leaning back against the table, she stood still and let her do it ...

She felt Marjan’s bitter breath move closer ... and she kissed her.

She tried to pull back her head, away from Marjan's stubborn mouth, but the darkness behind her seemed like a precipice, she couldn't go any further.

Marjan's hands crept in under her tank top and over her perspiring stomach, and slithered under her bra and over her breasts ... She couldn't breathe ... She wanted to scream, but she was afraid. Her voice was trapped in her throat.

Marjan's lips tore away from her mouth and slid over to her earlobe. Her wet tongue slithered down the side of her neck, down to her breast, and suckled her nipple ...

With the back of her hand she wiped away the lipstick and put her hands on Marjan's head and shoulder and tried to push her away. The coarseness of the girl's short hair reminded her of Morteza, who eleven days ago had been released from prison, his head shaved. She had not seen him until last night when she was in his arms, content, and ... She couldn't breathe. Marjan's hot breaths were creeping down over her stomach ...

"Mehri!"

She swung her head around and stared at the dark door with horror.

It was Morteza.

"Marjan!"

She was terrified the door would suddenly open.

Marjan, her arms still around her waist, slowly got up and calmly said, "You're late, Mr. Morteza!"

She smelled cigarettes ...

From behind the darkness, Morteza said, "The security guards stopped me. They wouldn't let me in without an ID."

His voice was hoarse.

“What have you been doing?”

“We’ve been really busy,” Marjan answered.

“That’s great! ... Mehri, I’m sorry I couldn’t make it here on time.”

She hesitated for a moment and then said, “It’s all right.”

Marjan was playing with her hair.

She turned away from her. She was trembling.

“I’ll just wait here until you’re done,” Morteza said.

“That’s good,” Marjan said, and quietly kissed her arm.

She knew she now had to shake the developing tank for forty-five consecutive seconds and then give it a few small shakes every thirty seconds.

“What was prison like, Mr. Morteza?”

“Prison? ... What can I say ... You know.”

“Is it true what they say?” Marjan asked. “I mean, about the interrogators raping male prisoners?”

She held the developing tank with both hands.

Morteza was silent.

Darkness loomed lower.

She started gently shaking the container ...

He had said there was a Revolutionary Guard there that night that everyone was afraid of. He seemed to be guards’ commander. The students called him Psycho Saiid. He was tall and skinny. With a dark, bearded face, and wearing a white shirt hanging over his pants. Rude and vulgar. He must have been a commando, the way he mercilessly beat and trampled the students. Morteza was taking photographs. Racing around, taking snapshots of everything that was

happening ... Psycho Saiid caught sight of him. Morteza turned and ran for the stairs. At some point he looked back and saw the man chasing after him. Racing up the stairs, shaking and out of breath, Morteza took the roll of film out of his camera. His slippers flew off his feet. The stairs were covered with blood and dirt, shards of broken glass. A group of students had taken refuge on the rooftop. Hopping on one leg, Morteza tore off one of his socks, stuffed the two rolls of film in it, and threw it under the air conditioning unit. Just then Psycho Saiid grabbed his camera strap from behind and as Morteza swung around, the man kicked him in the chest ...

“I was flogged ... like all the others.”

“Poor little thing! ...”

She knew Marjan wanted to belittle Morteza in front of her.

She thought of the photographs ...

“Now, are you still happy you gave up on electrical engineering and switched to philosophy!?”

Morteza was quiet.

Marjan again wrapped her arms around her from behind and whispered in her ear, “Shake it, Sweet-thing.” She cupped her hands. “Shake it.”

“To be honest, I don’t know.”

She wanted to turn around, to shove Marjan away, to snatch the key from her, open the door, and get out.

She shook the tank ...

“Faster!” Marjan murmured. “Faster!”

She was holding her tight, pressing her against the table.

She wanted to forsake the rolls of film and free herself from the weight of that darkness.

She thought of the photographs ...

Broken windows and shattered glass ... Click!

A trashcan in flames on the street ... Click!

Trails of greyish blood on the stairs, on the stone tiles of the hallways ... Click!

A door kicked through, the room visible through the gaping hole ...

A television, face down on the floor, still plugged in ...

Burned books and pamphlets in the middle of a room, half turned to ash ...

A wood table on its side, one leg broken ...

A pair of pants hanging from a nail, their cuffs burned ...

A hand with brass knuckles wielding a chain ... Click!

A ruthless face, mouth gaping, shouting with rage ... Click!

A student slumped on the ground, his face bloody, his arms shielding his head from a baton

...

A scrawny young man in a blood-soaked undershirt, two men hurling him out of a window

...

Bruised eyes swollen half shut ...

A six-inch gash on a student's head ...

A severed finger on the floor ... Click!

And tear gas that's still smoking ... still smoking ... still smoking ...

Chapture 11

Saiid held him by the shoulders from behind and spun him around so that he would lose his sense of direction. He was twirling and laughing ... The three of them were laughing ... Saiid let go of him. He was dizzy. He held out his arms to steady himself ... Darkness whirled around him and the sound of laughter reverberated from every direction.

They had tied a scarf over his eyes. When the dizziness stopped he stood up straight.

“Ready?” Saiid asked.

“Wait!”

He was still a bit unsteady.

“How many is this?” Marjan asked laughing.

The scarf smelled of Marjan’s hair. He smiled. He heard the white pigeon perched on the ledge of the top window coo. He raised his head toward the bird and the broken window.

“You’re allowed to take three steps in any direction,” Saiid said. “Then you have to kick the ball. Twice.”

He wrinkled his brow and concentrated for a moment to picture the ball ... Then he carefully took two steps forward and looked to his left, then to his right. Darkness carpeted the floor. He took a half-step to the left. Paused. Shifted his weight to one foot, moved his other foot back and kicked hard at the ball he couldn’t see. His foot struck the dark and Marjan and Saiid burst into laughter. He laughed, too. Again, he focused, and this time he turned slightly to the right and kicked harder. His foot sank into the dark. Frustrated, he grunted and mockingly kicked the dark, and kicked again and again, his foot ripping through the pitch-black, and the pitch-black

swelled and spread and he lost his balance and was about to fall when suddenly, he was smacked on the back of his head. Hard.

“Ouch!”

“That was your prize! Didn’t I say only twice?”

“So, where’s the ball? You tricked me!”

“It was right next to your foot, Stupid! Right here!”

He heard the plastic ball being kicked. It hit the wall, the pigeon coo-cooed, flapped its wings, and seemed to fly off. The ball rolled on the floor ... and stopped at the far end of darkness.

“Now it’s your turn,” he said. “My eyes are hurting.”

Just as he raised his hands to take off the blindfold, Saiid shouted, “Hey! Don’t touch it. You’re not allowed to take it off!” And he held him tight so he couldn’t move.

“Marjan! Tie his hands behind him ... I’ll hold him.”

“With what?”

“Over there, with that ...”

“What kind of a game is this?” he asked laughing.

“You could’ve said no,” Saiid said. “Come on, tie his hands, Chicken!”

“He won’t let me! ... Come on, stop wriggling!”

Saiid gripped him tighter.

“Okay! Okay! Don’t tie it so tight!”

His wrists were crossed behind him and he could feel the coarseness of the hemp rope around them.

“Come on! You can’t cuff me.”

“It’s a game, Stupid.”

Saiid let go of him.

Darkness surrounded him. He could smell feathers and damp dirt. He heard a clatter.

“Now ... there’s a stool here in the middle of the room. Exactly in the middle. If you manage to sit on it, I’ll untie your hands. If not ... Well, you know ...”

His voice was circling the room. Marjan was on the other side, giggling.

“It’s really close to you. You just have to walk backward and sit on it.”

Marjan went over to him. “Turn ... turn ... more.”

She spun him around and let him go. It was harder to keep his balance with his hands tied. He chuckled.

“Three steps only!”

He sharpened his ears hoping that the pigeon’s cooing would help him figure out the direction he was facing. But the pigeon wasn’t there, or if it was, it was silent.

Saiid seemed to have read his mind. He started imitating the bird in a deep-throated voice.

“Coo-roo-c’too-coo ... coo-roo-c’too-coo ...”

Marjan must have been covering her mouth with her hand. He couldn’t hear her laugh.

He turned slightly on his heels, paused, and took two steps back. He hit the wall.

Marjan snickered and Saiid sneered, “Stupid!”

He imagined there must be plaster dust on his back and elbows. He turned and stood facing the wall. It smelled of smoke. He kicked the wall and felt a piece of the smoky chalk break off and fall on the toe of his sneakers. He shook his foot and carefully took one step back, then another, and he stopped. He sensed the stool was now right behind him. He sat. He sat and fell down on his backside and sprawled out on the floor. Saiid and Marjan howled with laughter. He laughed, too.

The floor was cold and smelled of dust and pigeon droppings. He grumbled, rolled onto his side, leaned on one elbow, and got up.

“Again!” Saiid snapped.

“This isn’t fair. You pulled the stool out from under me.”

“No, I swear on my dad’s life, I didn’t! Did I, Marjan? ... It’s all part of the game, Stupid.”

“I don’t like this game.”

“Who cares, Stupid. I’m the boss. You have to obey everything I say ... Aha, wait a sec.”

And he smacked him on the back of the head again. This time harder.

“Ouch!”

Marjan snickered loudly.

“Poor thing, if he had just turned a tiny bit ...”

“The next stage is harder,” Saiid said.

He heard the rasp of a match being struck. Twice. Three times. Then it lit.

“Can you see through this?”

Marjan poked her finger through the hole on the knee of his pants and tickled him.

“Stop it!” he giggled. “You’ll make it bigger.”

“Marjan!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Marjan ran toward Saiid’s voice. The pungent smell of a cigarette swept under the headscarf and made his nose itch.

“Where did you get that?”

“I pinched it from my dad’s brief case ... Take a puff.”

“Don’t you dare tell my mom!”

“Take a puff ... Harder.”

Marjan started to cough.

“Marjan, you’re smoking!” he exclaimed.

“So what? I’ve done it before.”

Even though he couldn’t see her, he turned his face away from her.

“I want to be a smoker when I’m a grownup,” she said sounding hoarse.

And she coughed.

“Do you want to take a puff, too?” Saiid asked.

Marjan coughed again.

“Bring him over here.”

Marjan took him by the elbow and led him over to Saiid. Again, she coughed.

“Take a step forward ... a little more ... Okay!”

When the cigarette butt touched his mouth, he squeezed his lips shut.

“Ugh, now you’ve made it filthy ... Sure you don’t want it? It’s the last puff.”

“You’re the filthy one.”

His cell phone started to ring.

“Untie my hands!”

“Let me see who it is,” Saiid said.

He blew the cigarette smoke in his face.

“Marjan, take this.”

Saiid shoved his hand in his tight pants pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The ring was now louder. It echoed in the dark, abandoned ruin.

“It’s your mom.”

“Untie my hands!”

He wriggled his wrists to free them. The rope was coarse, and the more he struggled the tighter the knot became ... His phone stopped ringing.

Marjan coughed.

“Well, it stopped.”

Saiid pushed the cell phone back into his pocket.

He knew his mother would be worried because he hadn’t answered her call. The skin around his wrists was raw from the coarse rope.

“Marjan!” he snapped. “Take this rope off.”

“No way!” Saiid shouted from farther away. “The game isn’t over yet.”

He turned toward Saiid’s voice and was about to say, I’m not going to play anymore, when he heard the sound of liquid splashing ... and the smell of urine reached his nose. Saiid was in the corner of the room, peeing against the wall.

Marjan was quiet. She must have been watching him with curiosity.

“A—ah! ...”

The splashing stopped. Or she may have turned her back so that she wouldn’t see.

“Your hair is so pretty ...”

“Hey! ... Stop that!”

He lowered his head.

Saiid and his chuckle moved closer.

“Well, now we go to the next stage.”

“I won’t play!” he half shouted.

“Quiet! I told you, I’m the boss.”

“I’m going home.”

He took a few steps in the dark. Saiid grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him back.

“Where do you think you’re going? It’s a game, Stupid!”

“I said I don’t want to play!”

“You wouldn’t dare! If you disobey me, you’ll be punished.”

“You think you’re really the boss?”

“What did you say!?” Saiid growled. “You insulted the boss? ... Marjan, hit him!”

“No!”

“I said, hit him,” Saiid shouted.

Marjan softly tapped his face. Her hand was small and cold.

“Harder!”

There was a sound up above.

“Shhh!” Saiid quickly cautioned as he ran toward the stairs.

“Marjan,” he whispered. “Take off the rope ... Hurry!”

“No! He’ll be back in a second.”

“So what?”

“I’m scared. He’s crazy.”

“He kissed you, didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“You’re lying. I heard it.”

“You’re nuts!”

“You like him.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

They both grew quiet ...

The darkness felt dense and heavy, and the headscarf no longer smelled of Marjan’s hair.

“Saiid says your family are Baha’is. Is it true?”

With his head still down, he said, “Untie my hands.”

Marjan went behind him and reluctantly tugged at the rope ... a little to the left, a little to the right ...

His wrists were sore and his skin was burning.

“Saiid lied.”

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

Marjan quickly let go of the rope.

“You were going to untie him, weren’t you?”

“No, I swear to God! ... Hey! Let go of me, that hurts!”

He heard a loud slap.

For a moment there was silence.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Saiid shouted.

His cell phone started to ring again.

“If you leave,” Saiid yelled, “I’ll tell your mom you were smoking.”

“It must be my mom again. Take off the damn rope!”

The cell phone was still ringing. Saiid yanked it out of his pocket, muted it, and shoved it back in.

Marjan was gone. Or perhaps she was just sitting on the stairs sulking.

“I lied?” Saiid hissed in his ear. “So your mom isn’t Baha’i?”

“No, she’s not. She’s Zoroastrian.”

“No difference. You’re all filthy.”

“You’re the filthy one!”

Saiid shoved him hard. He stumbled back and was about to fall when he inadvertently landed on the stool. It groaned under his weight and tilted to one side. Its legs were loose.

“You have to stand trial ... legally ...”

Saiid was hovering around him.

“The accused must stand up!”

Now he was directly in front of him.

“This is supposed to be a game!?”

“Quiet! The accused can only answer questions.”

He kept quiet. He wished he had not let them tie his hands.

“Explain, when did you join the devious sect?”

“Did you learn this stuff from you dad?”

“I said, just answer the question.”

Now he was standing behind him.

“Nutcase! Do you even know what Zoroastrianism is?”

“So you admit that you’re not a Muslim.”

“You’re schizo!”

“Quiet! ... Anyone who doesn’t believe in God is a sinner.”

“Who says Zoroastrians don’t believe in God?”

“Don’t they worship fire?”

“Are you making this stuff up?”

“And their women shake hands with men. Don’t they?”

“So what?”

“You see!? ... Next question: Is it true that you don’t wash yourselves when you go to the bathroom?”

“I’ve had it,” he snapped, angry and fed up. “No more games!”

There was no sound. He couldn’t tell which side of him Saiid was standing.

Then Saiid said, “Therefore, based on the confession of himself the accused, Morteza, who said he is a sinner and they don’t believe in God, his punishment is the most severe and it’s execution and the sentence must be carried out, and that’s that, the final word!”

Saiid sounded like he was reading from a piece of paper and muddling it all up.

He wanted to laugh. A moment later, he heard the sound of something being tossed up in the air and falling back down on the ground ... The noise stopped and Saiid walked over to him.

“Lean your head forward.”

He hesitantly bent down his head a little and felt the bristles of a rope rub against his face and neck. He was frightened.

When the rope tightened around his throat he became terrified.

“Get up on the stool ... Wait ...”

Saiid picked up the stool and slammed it down on the ground in front of him.

“Climb up!”

He didn’t want Saiid to realize he was afraid. He put one foot up on the stool. It creaked and swayed a little to one side. Saiid was gripping his arm.

He climbed up on the stool. His knees were shaking.

“It’s just a game, right?”

It was all Marjan's fault. Perhaps she was now watching them from a distance.

All his attention was focused on the stool. He was afraid of making the slightest move.

He remained like that for a while. Time seemed to have stood still. There was total silence.

"Saiid," he said. "Saiid, are you there? ... Look, the stool is wobbly ... *Saiid!*"

He stopped talking and listened intently.

"Marjan," he whispered, "... are you there?"

The pigeon softly cooed. It sounded like a groan.

The darkness had thinned and seemed to be trickling down his legs.

He wanted to cry, but he was afraid Saiid was there and would make fun of him. His chin was raised and each time he swallowed he felt the rough rope around his neck.

"Hey, Saiid!"

There was silence. Suddenly his phone started to vibrate in his pocket ... he panicked ... the stool lurched ... the pigeon flapped its wings ...

Chapture 12

No one must have noticed how he struggled, struggled to get up from the sofa, and how with eyes closed he staggered, staggered to the counter to put his empty glass next to the bottles he couldn't see, and teetered, teetered into the narrow hallway. And holding onto the wall, he stumbled, stumbled forward, paused, and when the wooziness eased, he reeled shoulder first into a room with its door left ajar.

He closed the door with his back. It was quiet now. But the music and the clamor of the crowd still rang in his head.

The room was dark. He wanted to sleep just as he was, standing up and leaning against the door. He felt ill. He wanted to vomit. He pulled himself away from the door and fumbled, fumbled forward until his knees hit the soft edge of a bed. He slowly leaned forward, lay his hand on the mattress, and tumbled face-down on the bed.

The vapor of alcohol on his face smelled stronger as he exhaled, nauseating him. One of his arms lay crooked under his torso ... He could hear the tick-tock of a clock. His arm was tingling and slowly going numb, but he didn't have the energy to move.

He bent his knees and held his feet up in the air. He didn't want to dirty the bed of the host he didn't know. With the tip of one shoe he pushed, pushed down on the heel of his other shoe, slipped it off, and kicked it onto the carpet. Thump! ... The other shoe came off more easily, and ... plonk! It fell right there, on the bed.

He was groggy. His jaw was crooked and he was drooling on the cool sheet. He thought he shouldn't fall asleep ...

The lights keep dimming and brightening, the curly-haired girl is dancing, there are people all around, the girl raises her arms, her belly shows, a ring on her navel, he stares at the girl's bare stomach over the rim of his glass, an elbow nudges him, the man chuckles, he doesn't like it, he turns away but sees the ring, it gets bigger, bigger, it wants to pierce through a dark opening, a large pit, the opening closes, closes, turns into a dot, he turns, a man is standing in front of him, he can't see the girl, the girl is gone, he's angry, he doesn't like this man, his glass suddenly tips, his heart suddenly sinks ...

His leg jerked as he slept ... He is waist-deep in water, no one sees his pants are wet, he's embarrassed of the black hair on his legs, why did he undress in front of all these people, their backs are turned, smoke rises from the man's cigarette ... he's on the street, the car is running, no one at the wheel, the girl is there, smoking, she can't see him, she's smoking, he wonders why she can't see him, he wants to say something, her curly hair magnifies, now she's farther away, wearing a short skirt, the man is behind the wheel, he doesn't look at him, he knows he's angry, he's nauseous, he's next to the street gutter, he doesn't want to vomit, he digs into his pocket, his white handkerchief is very large, he's embarrassed, he's back in the house, everyone is smoking, there's a white napkin on the table, he reaches for it but can't pick it up, the girl is dancing, now her hair is black, long, very long, her face changes, it's another girl, in a skimpy dress, her earrings are seahorses, their mane is jagged, half the house is dark, one of the walls is missing, you can look up at the sky, he looks down, it's all water down there, it's nighttime, the girl is standing with her profile turned to him, he wants to touch her hoop earring, it turns into a seahorse, the seahorse's head grows bigger, turns black ... he feels ill, he doesn't want to vomit ... he hears the door. Thud! He's sitting on the sofa ... his pants are wet ... the girl is wearing a

skimpy dress, he sees her curly hair from a distance, now her hair is black ... there's music playing ...

Thud! The music stopped. He thought, but I'm awake.

The edge of the bed softly sank and he felt the weight of someone sitting down.

It must be the host ... What time is it? ... What if everyone has left! ...

He tried to move, roll a little onto his back, but his stomach, it was churning, he was afraid he'd vomit.

A hand moved behind him in the darkness ... it slowly slithered up his shoulders and neck, and the tip of long nails combed through the dark of his hair.

Again, the music and the commotion of the crowd echoed in his head and ... it stopped. He had a headache.

The fingers softly moved around in his hair, silently.

He thought the hand had mistaken him for someone else.

He was hot. He felt something weighing on his waist and legs. He slowly reached back and his fingertips felt the soft pile of a blanket. He didn't remember pulling it over himself. What if he had been sleeping, for hours, and someone had come in and put a blanket over him. He was embarrassed.

The girl swung the blanket off of him. The weight lifted.

He thought it was perhaps the girl with long black hair who was dancing. He could remember her large hoop earrings. Or perhaps it was the one in a skimpy dress, tall and lanky, she had come over and held out her hand for him to dance with her.

He grimaced and the girl dropped her hand, turned around, and walk away.

“You don’t turn down the hand of an eligible girl, it’s totally not cool.”

He downed his drink and didn’t answer Amir.

“She’s a small-towner, but she’s spent a lot on the nose and lips. I know.”

He didn’t like the sensation of someone’s wet breath on his earlobes.

He motioned to Nargess with a nod and she walked over with her drink.

“Why didn’t you dance with her?” she slurred.

“With that triple-A battery!?” he slurred back.

“She’s a good girl. She’s a poet, too.”

“Me! Dance! Pour me a sip ... no, from your own glass.”

Nargess emptied half her glass in his.

The girl held him by the shoulders and tried to turn him over, but he was heavy. Again, this time pulling harder, and he, tired, slowly turned his torso.

Lying on his back, he sensed something rise up in his throat and felt he was about to vomit.

The girl’s slim fingers softly scratched down his neck to the top button of his shirt and flipped it open. Then, the second button ... then, the third ...

He wanted to wipe away his drool with the back of his hand. But he couldn’t feel his numbed hand. With his other hand he held the frozen fingers and lifted them up. No sensation.

He heard the tick-tock of the clock again. He was hot. The girl gently blew on him and his chest cooled.

He like it.

The girl laid her hand on his chest and moved her face closer, and she blew again. His neck and the back of his ears cooled ... and he sensed the pungent smell of cigarettes.

His eyes burned. Holding his glass, he had sunk into a sofa and was watching people's heads obscured in the fog of smoke.

Curly-hair raised her arms again ... an elbow stabbed him in the ribs.

"You're eating her up with your eyes, man! Stop gaping at her like that!"

"Who is she?"

"I don't know her that well. Marjan. Nargess has the goods on her."

"What's that dangling from her bellybutton? ... A horse?"

"She used to be this guy's chick."

"Which guy?"

"The one you don't like ... the government slut."

"Point him out."

"You know, the one with the moustache. Said something. These days, he's a presenter on national TV ... He does comedy, too!" he snorted.

"Don't stick your mouth to my ear! ... That girl was this hairy guy's chick!?"

"A while back. And the chubby guy next to him is his brother. Mr. Engineer came with that drudge. Check her out! Wearing short sleeves with a headscarf! ... But she's got primo boobs."

"Is that a soda she's drinking?"

"And they call that *piercing*, Handsome. I think it's a fish ... but drop it with this one."

"Why? She's got a watchdog?"

“It’s long story.”

“What’s her story?”

“I’ll tell you.”

The girl scratched her nails slowly down his chest ... twirled a fingertip around his navel ... and pushed her hand under his tight belt and down his pants ...

He lay motionless. The tick-tock of the clock had grown louder. He felt ill but didn’t want to vomit now.

The girl pulled her hand out and cupped the bulge of his erection ... and felt the wetness of his pants.

He had balanced his glass on his thigh and was stirring the ice cubes with his finger.

The dark-haired girl walked over and stood with her back half-turned to him. With one her hand on her waist, she waved a cigarette in the air.

“Does anyone have a light?”

He could see a half-circle of her hoop earring under her hair.

“Light!”

He ignored her and sank deeper in the sofa.

A young guy walked over and held out his lighter. With the cigarette between her lips, the girl leaned forward and the guy flicked his lighter. It didn’t light. He shook it a few times. Flicked. It didn’t light. He shook it harder and flicked again. And again.

The girl remained half turned away from him and leaning forward, waiting.

He was looking at her large ass and drumming his fingers on his thigh other thigh.

The hairy guy, standing farther away, seemed to be grinning with one corner of his mouth.

“Screw you all!” the girl snapped.

Then she turned her head, and seeing a matchbook on the coffee table, looked at him and said, “Don’t you over-exhaust yourself, Your Highness!” And she bent down, grabbed the matchbook, lit her cigarette, and puffed the smoke in the air.

“What’s your problem?” he said.

The girl unconsciously put her hand on her bare stomach above the waist of her tight skirt, curled her lips and snickered, “You’re too drunk, Handsome!”

“Nahid, dear, it’s your song!” someone called out to her.

And the music grew louder. The girl held out her arm, opened her fist, and the matchbook dropped down on the table. She turned and was swinging her behind as she walked off when a man, perhaps accidentally, knocked into his knee and his glass tipped over on his pants.

The girl pulled on his belt strap and unbuckled it. She was unzipping his pants when he grabbed onto its waist.

“It’s wet,” the girl said quietly.

Her voice was not familiar.

His fingers loosened and let go of his pants.

The girl held the side of his pants and pulled them down to his knees.

Cool air swept over his thighs and he imagined he was lying down on a lawn ... and he smelled fresh grass.

His heart was palpitating. He knew it was because of too much alcohol. He tried to open his eyes wide, but only his eyebrows moved up and his eyes remained closed.

It was dark and his temples were throbbing.

The girl's hand slid from his groin into his shorts and around his penis.

His throat tasted sour and burned. He forced down his saliva.

The girl turned her wrist and pulled out the tip of his penis from his shorts.

His heart beat faster, he couldn't hear anything, all his senses were gathered in the girl's fist ... and he felt the wetness of her tongue ...

The girl was greedy ...

He felt as though his entire body was in her fist ...

Thump!

It was his other shoe falling on the carpet ... and then the rustle of clothes ... And the bed creaked as the mattress sank under the girl's knees as they clamped against his sides, and she slowly lowered herself on his thighs ...

"Little Miss. Pistachio was really pissed! What did you say to her?"

He didn't answer.

"She's done half the town since her divorce ... now she's zeroed in on you. Get it?"

"Her rear fender's been banged up, hasn't it?"

"Damaged front and back. So I've heard."

"What's Nargess doing hanging out with her?"

"How should I know? Let me fill that up for you."

His arm and hand were still asleep, but were slowly starting to tingle. He put his other hand on the girl's firm, slim thigh and slowly, slowly, moved it to her hot groin ...

The girl sighed.

He slid his palm along the crook of her thigh and up her torso, and with his fingertips felt the warmth of sweat under her breast ... he was about to cup her breast when the girl gently took his fingers and lowered his hand onto the deep curve of her waist and pushed down.

He clutched her flesh and thrust down harder.

“Aa—h ...”

The girl's hand pulled his hand back onto her buttocks ... that were cold.

His finger was in his glass, stirring the ice, as he watched Amir and another guest arguing, and it looked as though it was about to get heated.

People were still feverishly dancing to the loud music when he saw a curly-haired woman limp over and sit sideways on the next sofa. She groaned, took off one shoe, and started to rub her toes. Another girl click-clacked over, gave her two adhesive bandages, and click-clacked away.

Curly turned her foot and again groaned, “Ouch!”

He saw a blister on the back of her heel. Her name ... he couldn't remember.

With the tip of her nails, Curly peeled open one of the adhesive tapes and leaned over and placed it on the red sore.

He could see her small breasts down her neckline.

Nargess came over and sat down next to him.

“A-OK?”

“Yep ... Listen, tell this friend of yours—aha! Marjan. Yea, tell her to take some cough syrup. It’ll do her *chest* some good.”

“That’s rude!” she said slapping his leg with the back of her hand. “She might hear you!”

“Tell her to at least stuff a few rolled up socks in her bra.”

“*Shh!* ... You’re drunk, you brute!”

Still leaning down, Marjan paused and her hands went still. Then she raised her head, stood up, and walked away without looking at them.

“I think she heard you!”

As soon as Nargess got up, Amir plunked down in her place.

“The guy’s an idiot!”

The girl leaned over and her hair cascaded over his face ...

Again, the scent of green grass and the perfume of her hair blanketed his face.

The girl was softly brushing her dry lips over his closed mouth ...

His nose and cheeks started to itch. He turned his face slightly and slid his tongue between the girl’s plump lips and felt the wet graininess of her tongue. He moved his hand up under her hair and stroked her slim neck and played with the soft of her ear with his fingertips ... the earring wasn’t there!

“You didn’t say what her story is?”

The girl tore her lips away and the hair swept away from his face.

He gently reached up in the dark to feel her breasts, but the girl, without seeing, caught his hand in the air and moved it down under her slender shin and ... they remained like that, motionless.

The darkness grew more hushed, and the clock tick-tocked again.

The girl put the palm of her hand on his chest, half-rose, and with her other hand again took his penis and lowered herself ... and her moan echoed in the dark ...

He couldn't feel her weight. He swallowed hard, and his hand that was tingling crept onto the soft of her stomach, and his fingers felt the cold of her bellybutton ring!

“The lady has AIDs! ... I know for sure.”

This time the girl gripped his hand hard and pain coursed up his arm and whirled in his shoulder and neck ... He didn't pull away, and with his cramped hand shaking from the waves of pain he clawed at her stomach and the girl groaned loudly and clutched his hand and moved up and down faster and her naked weight pressed down on his stomach and the acidic taste rose up to his throat and his palate soured and he was about to vomit and hard as he tried he couldn't swallow his saliva and he pressed his legs together and yanked his other hand out from under the girl's shin and grabbed her breast and squeezed and the girl moved up and down and he didn't want her to and he turned his torso and bent his knees and leaned to one side to pull himself out from under the woman's heavy body when the bed creaked and the weight lifted away and the ring and stretched skin of her belly were still in his fist and the woman was on the edge of the bed and he wouldn't let go and the woman clawed at his hand, turned, and pulled back to free herself and the ring tore off her bellybutton and she cried out and he body tore away and he felt

the warmth of blood in his hand and he heard something fall and ... *Click!* The door opened, and *click!* It closed.

The bloody ring was in his hand and he didn't have the strength to move. He forced his eyes open, but there was only darkness and cold. Lying on his back, he ran his fingers along the jagged neck of the seahorse and as they reached the tip of its tail ... he rolled over and heaved ... heaved ... heaved ... and vomited on the bed.

Chapter 13

Ta-ta-tak ...ta-ta-tak ... The train was traveling through the dark of night, there was no glimmer of light, and her heart was racing ... *Ta-ta-tak ...ta-ta-tak ...*

She had drawn the curtains tight and left the cabin door unlocked, and wearing a thin camisole, she was lying down on the bottom folding bed, waiting. She knew he would come. *Ta-ta-tak ... ta-ta-tak ...*

“Don’t cover yourself with a blanket.”

It was cold, and ...

“Here, put on some perfume.”

There was the smell of steel and the scent of a man, and ...

“Stay as tight against the wall as you can.”

She was staring at the cabin ceiling and could see nothing but darkness. It felt as though she were on an empty train speeding through a dark, endless tunnel ... *ta-ta-tak ... ta-ta-tak ...*

It was past midnight. Her mouth was dry and she was craving something sweet, something warm. Even though the door and curtains were closed, she felt cold air blowing in from somewhere. She huddled closer to the wall. There was the smell of clay and straw bricks ...

In the summertime, when the sun set, she would fill the Coleman with ice and go up to the rooftop before the others. She would first sweep it with a wet broom and then unfold the cotton-weave carpet and one by one lay out the mattresses so that they would cool. Then she would lie down and watch the sky ... As soon as she heard sounds coming from the adjacent rooftop, she would crouch down and in the half-light of dusk watch Morteza spread out something to sit on so that he could read in the dim glow of the street lamp.

She thought of Amir and her stomach churned.

Time had slowed and the more it passed the heavier the darkness weighed on her chest ...
Something was simmering inside her. She didn't know why she was so restless now that after two and half months the time had come for her to face him.

She was about to speak ...

“Shhh!”

The cabin door opened, the train's noise flooded in, and the door shut.

She closed her eyes in fear and whispered, “Lock it.”

There was no reply.

“Lock it,” she repeated.

She felt darkness gazing at her. Then she heard the lock click and her heart started to race, like that of a young deer tethered to a post or a rock, or something.

She had seen him a little earlier in front of the bathroom. She had kept her head down and was biting her lip. She knew Morteza was watching her. Marjan was still wearing her dark sunglasses and looking out the window, perhaps she was keeping an eye on Morteza's reflection in the glass.

The three of them stood there in silence, and the train rattled loudly as it sped through the night ...

The old man who had been in the bathroom rushed out and caught them by surprise. Then, seeming embarrassed that he had taken so long, he straightened his shirt and hurried away.

“Go ahead,” Marjan said.

She suddenly came to, and without raising her head walked past Marjan and into the bathroom. She killed some time and then with an eyebrow pencil faintly wrote on the mirror:

Railcar 8, first cabin. And with a trembling hand she flushed the toilet.

“Mehri!?” he whispered.

“*Shhh ...*”

“It’s so dark in here!”

His voice was as familiar as the road they lived on ...

“This one is great! I read it in one sitting! I didn’t even notice the sun come up.”

He used to say the same thing every time. Then he would hand her a book covered with a dust jacket he had made with a sheet of newspaper.

“When you’ve finished reading it, leave it in that corner and put a stone on top of it. I’ll come and take it.”

And then he would hop back over the low clay and straw wall that separated their rooftops.

She again thought of Amir and felt sad.

Morteza’s weight settled down on the edge of the bed.

“I thought you were alone,” he said in a hushed voice.

“She’s asleep.”

And she motioned with her head toward the top bed.

“Why was she wearing sunglasses at night?! ... Who is she? A relative?”

“She’s sensitive to light. Yes. She gets migraine headaches.”

“Where are you two going? Don’t you have school?”

“The final exams haven’t started yet.”

She had stopped going to school ever since she moved to the house on Bahar Street and Marjan and Saiid became her aunt and uncle, who supposedly had recently moved there from the provinces.

“Why have you grown a moustache?”

Near dusk, while boarding the train, she had caught sight of him in the crowd. He was with Mrs. Nargess, and carrying a travel bag.

“There he is!” Saiid had said. “He came!”

At first, she didn’t recognize him. With that black moustache he looked just like the communists.

She knew his family had relatives along the Caspian coast. His mother must have come along so that no one would grow suspicious of him.

“Hurry up!” Saiid said yanking on her sleeve. “Get on the train!”

And the train was grazing and grinding against the rails as it went ...

Feeling his way in the dark, Morteza put his hand on her bare arm.

She shivered and curled up. She felt that cold air blowing in again.

He gently moved his hand away.

“But, didn’t you want me to come?”

She had cramps ... and as usual she had become moody and her entire body felt sore ... *ta-tak* ... and the smell of the perfume she was wearing was making her nauseous. She wanted to scream in his face, Don’t touch me, you louse! Her nails dug into the bed.

“Where did you suddenly disappear to?” she asked quietly.

She had clutched the book to her chest and kept an eye on the door to the rooftop, afraid that someone might show up and see her there with Morteza.

“But they’re fighting against the government, they don’t harm ordinary people ...” she had argued.

“Haven’t they now allied themselves with Saddam? Well then, if I or Amir or anyone else were a soldier at the front, an Iraqi soldier would come in the dead of night and slit our throat with a wire while we were on guard duty!”

“These are all lies! Where do you get all this from?”

“I’m twenty years old, Mehri. I’ve matured.”

“Yes, I know,” she said grudgingly.

Morteza stepped a little closer and took the book from her.

“Do you still pray?” he asked.

“Don’t you!? ... So it’s true, you’ve become a communist!?”

“I want to become a writer, Mehri.”

Morteza’s eyes gleamed in the half-light of dusk. Their fingers touched. Her heart was pounding against her chest. She was afraid someone would suddenly show up. She closed her eyes and leaned closer ...

“Mehri!”

She swung around and saw her mother standing in the doorway watching her. When she turned back, Morteza was gone.

“I stayed at Nargess’s place for a few days. But, I wasn’t comfortable there ...”

His voice was closer and his dark hand was playing with her hair.

“Her husband is a nice guy, but he sides with the petty-bourgeoisie.”

She was agitated. She didn’t like him touching her.

“I’ve been living in Karaj for the past month or so. I work in a cardboard box making workshop, and I just sleep there at night.”

Her nipples felt tender.

“There’s a Kurdish guy who works there, too. He’s Iraqi, but he’s been living in Iran since he was eleven. He’s an avid reader ...”

She could hardly hear his words. Saiid, his face bandaged and his eyes bloodshot, was staring at her.

“Be kind to him. Don’t let him sense your hatred. If he gets suspicious, our plan will fall apart ...”

There was that cold gust again. She pressed her thighs together to ease her cramps.

The bed creaked as Morteza shifted his weight. Now, he seemed to be leaning on his elbow.

“I never come to Tehran. It’s too risky ... You know.”

His voice was close to her ear.

“Only once, I decided to just go for it ... I had to bring some money for my mom, and I thought I might see you, too ... The lights were out in your house.”

Time seemed to have stood still ... *ta-ta-tak ... ta-ta-tak ...*

“My mom said she hadn’t seen you in a long time,” he went on. “She said your mother was very worried. She was afraid that ...”

There was a sound from the top bed. Morteza grew quiet ... There was the smell of steel ...

“... that you had moved into a team house!”

He took her hand and twiddled with her fingers.

Why was time not passing!? She wanted to scream, but she stifled the urge in her throat.

“Your hands are so cold! Let me throw something over you.”

“No!” she hissed as she pulled away her hand.

“Mehri!” he said taken aback.

Again, she thought of what Saiid had told her. But she couldn’t help it, she couldn’t repress her rage and hatred. ... *Ta-ta-tak ... ta-ta-tak ...*

“What’s the matter with you?”

There was the smell of smoke ... and a bitter taste in her throat.

“Why did you squeal on Amir?”

... *Ta-ta-tak ... ta-ta-tak ...*

When she turned the corner, she saw two armed Revolutionary Guards in front of her house. Her heart stopped. She clasped her books to her chest, lowered her head, and pretended she hadn’t seen them, but she knew they were watching her. She unlocked the door with her key, walked in, and quickly closed it behind her. And she let out her breath. There was no one in the front yard. She ran past the shallow pool and toward the veranda. “Mom!” she called out. There was no answer. She went inside. The closet doors were wide open and everything was in disarray. Suddenly, she heard her mother moaning and raced down to the basement. Her mother was sitting there wrapped in her chador and crying.

“What happened, Mom?”

“They took Amir ... They took your brother ... *My Amir!*”

Amir’s books and belongings were scattered all over on the basement floor.

“I was in the other room sweeping when I heard all this noise ... they suddenly burst into the house! ...”

Then she warily asked, “Are they still here?”

“No. But two of them are still out there, in front of the door.”

Mother pulled open her chador and took out a stack of papers from under her shirt.

“Mehri, what are these? Leaflets?”

“Where did you find them?”

“Back there ... As soon as I heard those men yelling and jumping over the wall, I hid them under my chador. They didn’t notice. What’s written in them?”

She held her mother and kissed her. “You did well, Mom. Now give them to me, we have to burn them ...”

She hurried into the yard and fetched a large tin can. She threw the leaflets in it, poured kerosene over them, and lit a match. A burst of flames licked up.

That night she dreamed that black smoke was rising up to the sky from all the front yards in the neighborhood ...

“Me? Squeal on Amir!?” Morteza said in a hoarse whisper.

“You, backstabber! ... Backstabber! ...”

Her breath came in sobs and her face, hair, and pillow were wet with tears.

“Six, seven of the guys were arrested. All in one day! Behrouz and his brother ... they were executed a week later.”

She sniveled.

“B-Behrouz and Babak w-were executed?” he stuttered.

“You had made plans to meet Amir that day. And you disappeared right when they were all arrested.”

“I ... You know that I ...,” Morteza stammered, “I left the organization a long time ago.”

“If they execute Amir ... if they ... Don’t touch me!”

Her cramps now came in spasms coursing down her thighs. She swallowed hard.

“My mom has been weeping day and night for two months ... my dad has stopped going to work ...”

“Mehri,” he said gently, “I didn’t arrange to meet Amir that day. Who told you all this?”

Her eyelids were burning ...

“Amir was supposed to meet Morteza at four o’clock, they arrested him at five! A few other sympathizers Morteza knew were exposed, too!”

Her eyes were half-closed and Marjan was putting on eyeliner for her.

“He should’ve been purged a long time ago. After he cut away from the organization, everywhere he went, he criticized their strategies!”

“And once he somehow managed to dodge the trap the guys set for him,” Marjan added.

“If you can,” Saiid said again, “pretend you have to go to the bathroom and leave the cabin. Just open the door and walk out. I’ll take care of him.”

He took the cartridge out of the Colt and snapped it back in.

Cli-click!

“You’re not going to ...,” Marjan said.

“It’s just a precaution.”

She pressed on her forehead with two fingers and grimaced from the pain.

“When is that cast coming off?” Marjan asked.

“The doctor said it has to stay on for three months.”

“Well, it’s almost over. Still, you’re lucky you didn’t hit any pedestrians.”

Saiid didn’t reply.

“Do you want me to be in the cabin? You know, I could.”

“No. Just keep an eye on the corridor.”

He tucked the hunting knife in his boot.

“After it’s done, we’ll get off at some middle-of-nowhere station.”

“What’s the matter?” Marjan asked.

“Nothing. It’s just time for my ...”

“It’s anxiety,” Saiid said.

She was anxious.

Marjan leaned over and smelled her hair.

It embarrassed her.

“Don’t forget everything sister Marjan told you. Distract him. You have to can’t let him catch on to what’s going on.”

Her eyelids for quivering.

“Don’t cover yourself with a blanket.”

“Here ... put on some perfume.”

“Stay as tight against the wall as you can.”

Ta-ta-tack ... ta-ta-tack ... She pressed her bare feet against cabin’s cold wall and shivered.

“I didn’t make plans to meet Amir. I didn’t even know where he was. He sent a message through one of the guys that he wanted me to go see him somewhere, some local joint near the university. He came on his motorcycle. He was really spooked. He said, ‘Morteza, be careful. They arrested one of the top guys, but they let him go just two days later!’ He said, ‘Lay low for a while.’”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the guy broke down and they let him go. He must have squealed on a few guys or promised to cooperate.”

“Broke down? In two days!?”

Her eyelids were quivering again.

“They beat him really bad. For two entire days.”

Now she could hear Saiid’s breaths heaving ...

“You say you weren’t in the organization any more. So, why did you go into hiding?”

“Leaving the organization isn’t as simple as that, Mehri.”

“Why did you go to Karaj?”

“Didn’t you notice the military police at the station? They’ve been out full force arresting army evaders. I’m a draftee, and I don’t want to go to the front. The bastards; they’ll even drag you off a bus in the middle of nowhere. If ...”

Again, there was a sound from the top bed and Morteza grew quiet for a few seconds.

In a more hushed voice he said, “If you don’t have your exemption or completion of service papers, they’ll send you straight to the garrison. And three months later you’re at the front. The one time I came to Tehran, I took Pajra’s ID card, so I could claim I was an Iraqi if they stopped and questioned me.”

“Didn’t Amir say who it was?” she whispered even more quietly.

“He mentioned his name, but I didn’t know the guy ... I think ...”

She put one hand over Morteza’s mouth and with her other hand gripped his arm.

She could see the image of that large hunting knife in front of her face, its bone handle, its long, steel blade with those vicious jags.

“You look good with a moustache. It suits you.”

She said it loud enough for her voice to reach the top bed.

“And, you’re lying that you’ve missed me ...”

Morteza wanted to speak, but she was pressing her hand tight over his mouth.

“If you really missed me, well ...”

She took his hand and lay it on her stomach. His hand was hot and the pain eased for a moment.

Cli-click! ...

The sound of a cartridge being loaded was echoing in her head ...

She grabbed his side and pulled him down on her chest. The bed creaked and she felt Morteza’s hot breaths close to her lips.

She slowly turned her face and choking with tears and fear, whispered, “Run, Morteza! Run!”

For a moment, he remained motionless.

The train seemed to be glued to the rails and struggling to tear away, and it couldn’t, and it’s clamor was growing louder ...

Her lips were trembling. “There’s someone else up there!”

The cold gusts of wind whipped up dirt and dust. Leaves and twigs whirled in the air, and there was smoke and burned paper everywhere ... Then, there was no sound at all, not even the clatter of the train racing through the dark. She felt she was floating in darkness ... Morteza was silent. Still. As if he had again disappeared. There was the smell steel, the scent of a man. Her thighs throbbed and her stomach cramped and pain whirled in her body ... Then her inner thighs were wet and warm and blood was trickling from her body ... her legs were hot and her body

burned ... blood seeped everywhere and dripped from the edge of the bed onto the floor and the cabin filled with blood and everything turned red and there was silence ... time protracted in the darkness ... and the train travelled in silence.

Chapter 14

“My heart says, Leave, leave.

My heart says, Stay, stay.

My heart cannot bear it.

What would I do without you?”

He was standing next to the wall with his eyes closed, playing the accordion and singing The King of Hearts. He never grew tired of it. He knew many Tehranis enjoyed those old songs and would stop for a minute or two to reminisce and hum along with him, and then they would shake their heads in sorrow and walk away. It was snowing. The road was empty, but once in a while he would hear the sound of a coin being tossed on the ground in front of him, and he would realize someone was there, watching him.

His fingers were ice cold. He held them up to his mouth and blew on them.

“Here, young man, take this.”

It was a girl’s voice. He turned toward it and held out his hand. His fingers touched her wool glove and he took the money.

“How much is it?”

“A thousand tomans.”

He was happy. He slipped the leather straps off his shoulders and carefully set the accordion down on the ground. He folded the bill and stuffed it in his sock. Then he knelt down on one knee and blindly swept his hand over the brick pavement searching for coins.

“Here,” the girl said, “here’s one.”

And now gloveless, she took his hand, turned his palm up, and put a cold coin in it. He liked the warmth of her touch.

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

But he was.

“How much do you make a day?”

“Not much,” he said with a chuckle. “People don’t come out when it’s cold.”

“Where do you live?”

“Far away. Way down there. You wouldn’t know the place.”

“Where are your mom and dad?”

“My dad is dead. My mom is sick, at home.”

“Do you always come here?”

“No, I go uptown, too. Niavaran, Aghdassieh ... There was a woman, pretty like you ...”

“Like me!? How do you know I’m pretty?”

“You are. I know. I can tell from your voice.”

He heard a window open a few floors up.

“Miss! ... Miss!,” a woman called out. “Did the blind kid leave?”

“No, he’s here, under the awning.”

He was used to hearing that word, but still, it pained him.

“Sorry to trouble you,” the woman’s voice rang out from above. “I’m going to throw down this bill. Give it to him. He has a nice voice. Tell him to come again.”

“All right, throw it.”

“Urgh ...!”

“What happened?” he asked.

“It got stuck in the branches.”

“It’ll fall down if you shake the tree,” the woman called out.

“No!” he said. “Don’t shake the tree! It’ll wake up.”

“Who will wake up?”

“The tree! It’s winter. The bill will fall down on its own when the wind starts.”

He blew on his fingers, took his money out of his pocket, and sat down on the ground.

“How much is this bill?”

“Two hundred tomans.”

He started adding in his head ... Seventeen fifty-toman bills, eight twenty-five-toman bills, and another hundred seventy there ...”

“Were you born blind?”

“No, I could see. I know all the colors ... Yellow, blue, pink, pistachio green ... But then I got sick and my eyes stopped seeing.”

“What did you have?”

“I don’t know. They say it’s called *dégénérescence maculaire*!”

“What a difficult name!” the girl giggled.

“But when I’m older, I’m going to go to America to have an operation.”

“Morteza!”

It was Amir’s voice moving toward them. “How much did you make?”

“Not much. Just a little. How about you?”

“Some guy picked a fortune-telling card and gave me five hundred tomans.”

“Hide it! ... What time is it?”

“Damn, it turned red ... It’s ten to one.”

Amir started running toward the intersection.

“That poor guy, why were his eyes bruised?”

“Forget about him, he’s a junkie. He got beaten up last night.”

“He’s an addict? But he’s about your age!”

“He’s been hanging around men smoking opium for so long that he’s gotten hooked on the smoke. I keep telling him to stop going.”

“You live in the same house?”

“They’re in a different room.”

“Be careful!” the girl said. “Don’t lose your money ...”

She moved up close. Very close. A bill must have been sticking out of his pocket. She put her hand in and pushed the money all the way down.

“They’ll pick your pocket if you’re not careful.”

The perfume of her headscarf and the brown scent of her hair swirled around in his head. His face grew hot, and for a moment he could no longer hear the wet sounds of the street.

“One day two guys tried to steal my money. I was on to them. The minute one of them reached over, I whacked his hand with a stick this thick and made him scream. The other one had a knife. He tried to take my accordion. I hit him on the head really hard ... then people came running. What a mess ...”

There was shouting in the distance.

“What’s going on over there?”

“It’s the City Hall guys, they’re taking that peddler’s cart ...”

“The roasted beets guy?”

“Yes. The poor thing. They dumped all his beets on the snow! ... And all those people over there, not one of them is stepping up to help him. All they ever do is just record everything with their cell phones.”

He felt around and picked up accordion, and one by one slung the straps over his shoulders.

“What if they come after you, too?”

“They leave us alone. Saiid Khan always gives them their kickback.”

“What’s a kickback?”

The cars were honking their horns. “You don’t know what a kickback is?” he said laughing. “It’s money!”

“Are you leaving?”

He was hungry. “Saiid Khan will come to pick us up any minute now.”

He held out his hand. “Is it still snowing?”

“Yes.”

A big drop of water fell on the back of his neck and rolled down under his collar. He shivered. The accordion groaned and went silent.

“Have you ever read *The Book of Kings*?” he asked.

“Umm ... a little.”

“He went searching ‘til he arrived

Where in the world he saw no light ...”

“Bravo!”

“ ‘The night as dark as an African face

No star nor sun or moon in sight ...”

“How did you manage to read *The Book of Kings*?”

He laughed. "My grandmother used to read a few pages of it to me every night, and I would memorize them. I know the whole book by heart."

"Do you go to school?"

"I used to. Not anymore. I was a good student. I always got A+ in math. The teacher used to call me Nemeth."

"Can you play chess?" the girl asked excitedly.

"No."

She grew quiet for a moment, and then, "You said there used to be a woman ..."

"She was very rich. She took me to her house. She cooked for me, gave me a pair of shoes. She said they were her husband's ... They fit me."

"What a nice lady."

He lowered his voice and added, "Then she said, 'Come sleep in my bed.' I said, 'But my clothes are dirty.' She said, 'It doesn't matter, take them off, I'll wash them for you.' ... I had some really weird dreams that night ..."

He pulled his wool hat down over his ears.

The girl remained silent.

He reached out and grabbed the edge of her coat. "What's your telephone number?"

"My telephone number?" the girl laughed. "Sixty-six, twenty-three ..."

"No, your cell phone."

"Zero, one, two, four, four, seven, two, two, three, seven."

She said it fast.

"You're not going to remember it."

He was chilled to the bone, but he smiled. He sensed the girl looking at his feet. His sneakers were torn and his big toe was numb.

“So, you want to go to America when you grow up.”

“Science has advanced a lot. Last night they were saying on the radio that doctors have managed to transplant eyes!”

“I hadn’t heard that!”

He heard a click.

“Did you take a picture of me?”

“I was just checking my phone. Why? You don’t like people taking pictures of you?”

“No, I don’t mind. One time, a famous actor secretly took pictures of us ... Of himself and me.”

“So?”

“I asked him if he took pictures. He said no. He lied.”

He heard the rumble of a motor cycle coming down the sidewalk. The girl grabbed his hand and they stood flat against the wall to let it pass.

“So I threw his money back at him.”

He was trembling.

“My gloves are girls’ gloves,” she said gently. “Otherwise, I’d give them to you.”

“It was one of those cashiers checks, a hundred thousand tomans.”

“Lady, will you buy a chewing gum? Please! I just have a few left. Please, won’t you buy one ...”

It was Nargess.

“Get lost!” he shouted in a harsh, manly voice.

“Nutcase!” Nargess barked back.

He quickly put the accordion down on the ground and felt around for something to throw at her ...

“Will you buy one? For the love of God, lady ... a chewing gum ...”

He found a stone and hurled it in Nargess’s direction. It hit the wall.

“Scram!”

“Hey!” the girl screamed sounding afraid. “No stones! ...”

“Mind your own business!” Nargess snapped. “And you, Blindy, you don’t own the street!”

“Yes, I do, Lamebrain! Are you going to get lost or do I have to beat you up like that other time?”

“Is she your sister?” the girl asked.

“This ugly creep, my sister?”

“Are you making up lies again? ... Lady, he says the same bullshit to everyone. He’s a liar.”

He was groping around for something to throw at her. He couldn’t find anything and didn’t know how to get rid of the pest.

“Everything he says is a lie, Lady. His mom blinded him when he was a kid, just so she could take him to beg on the streets with her. She poured salt in his eyes!”

“Not true!” he yelled. “Get lost, whore!”

“Oh!” the girl gasped. “That’s so vulgar!”

He was about to burst into tears. He sniveled.

“His mom is a junkie, Lady.”

“No, she’s not!” he shouted.

He pulled off one of his sneakers and threw it at her voice.

“Mama Marjan has been sick for a long time.”

“And his dad isn’t dead. He’s an Afghani, he went back to Kabul. So, his grandmother sold him to Saiid Khan.”

“Get lost, Slut!” he shouted as loud as he could.

The girl slapped her hand over his mouth.

He grew quiet and choked back his tears. The warmth of her hand was on his lips and he didn’t want her to take it away.

“I swear she’s lying ...,” he said with a lump in his throat. “My dad died in a car accident. Everyone knows ... She ... She ... Shall I tell her? ... She’s pregnant.”

“Oh, my god!” the girl gasped.

“Not so!” Nargess snarled. “Not so, you liar!”

“She’s only ten, and she’s pregnant. I swear. She showed me her stomach.”

He heard the rattle of the pickup truck pulling over at the corner.

“Nargess!” Saiid Khan shouted.

Nargess went running to the truck.

The girl fetched his sneaker and said, “Here ... put it on.”

She lifted his foot by the heel and slipped his toes into the shoe.

“I swear she’s lying,” he pleaded. “She’s the one who lies all the time, to everyone.”

He heard the pickup truck’s door open and close.

“Morteza!”

“I’m coming,” he shouted back. “My money is stuck up here in the tree!”

And he whispered to the girl, “Can I call you?”

The girl hesitated a moment.

“Do you remember my number, or should I repeat it?”

“I remember.”

They stopped talking.

Saiid Khan walked over to them and growled, “What’s the matter?”

He pointed up at the tree and stammered, “There ... up there ...”

“The woman threw a bill out the window for him,” the girl said. “But it got stuck in the branches.”

Saiid Khan kicked the tree.

The boy shuddered and yanked his hat down over his ears so he wouldn’t hear.

The man kicked the tree again. Harder.

“Don’t hit it!” the girl pleaded.

“The hell with it,” Saiid Khan grumbled. “It’s only two hundred tomans. It’s not worth it.”

The boy picked up the accordion and pulled its straps over his shoulders.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Saiid Khan said as he reached down and snatched the thousand toman bill out of his sock.

“You scoundrel!”

He slapped the boy hard on the back of his neck.

The accordion groaned ...

“I swear, I wasn’t hiding it. I was going to give it to you!”

“Move your ass and get into the truck!”

Without another word, the boy quietly walked toward the truck ... It was snowing ... He knew the girl was standing there, watching him ...

Chapture 15, **You Raped Her**

“Mind your legs, Trash!” the interrogator barked as he kicked her leg and walked by.

A small spot between her breasts burned.

She gathered her legs closer and pressed her body against the wall. She couldn't see him, but she recognized his voice and his vulgarity. He always shouted and cursed.

Her lips were swollen and numb and her mouth tasted of blood. The floor in the corridor was cold, but her hands were hot and the metal handcuffs binding her to the radiator were burning her wrists.

It was probably still snowing outside, everywhere dressed in white. She turned and looked at the darkness of the corridor.

The interrogator had given up trying to make her talk. He had angrily yanked at her chador, pulled her to himself, and hissed, “After I'm done with you, you'll never dare hold your head up again ...”

That was the only sentence he had spoken quietly, slowly, deliberately, and without his saliva spraying onto her face.

She had laughed bitterly to herself and thought, Nothing can be worse than execution.

For several hours now, they had left her there alone. But the welts from the lashes still throbbed. She was sitting sideways; each time her back inadvertently touched the wall, pain surged through her body and made her want to let out all the screams she had suppressed in the interrogation room.

The chador they had thrown over her head smelled of pus and blood, burned flesh and yanked out hair.

She was blindfolded, but she could tell from the sound of boots and the shuffling of prisoners' bare feet that they were constantly coming and going. She knew the prisoners were likely blindfolded, too, and couldn't see her huddled in a corner, waiting for her next beating.

Ever since her arrest, she had not stopped thinking about that window, about the all-safe signal, about the half-drawn curtain, and the flower pot that was not on the windowsill.

She could hear the sound of screams and lashes emerging from the depth of darkness ... screams and lashes ... screams and lashes

One voice sounded familiar. It sounded like it was Nargess, wailing under the whip ... Then she heard Nargess's two-year-old child crying ... She shuddered.

Up until that moment, she had never realized how people's screams differ.

She wished she had taken the gun from Morteza.

They had uncuffed her hands several times during the past two days. Once to take her to the bathroom, and three or four times to take her to the interrogation room. The first time they took her to that room, they beat her without ever speaking. Slaps, kicks, punches ... Several people, ruthlessly, without pause ... Then they threw her face down on a bed, stuffed a dirty sock in her mouth, and two people pinned her legs and arms down, and ... they flogged her with a cable, on her back, on her buttocks and thighs, on the soles of her feet. They had covered her with a flimsy chador and they had thrashed and thrashed and trashed ... with no words, no questions ... and in that cold, she burned with pain ...

She hoped Morteza had seen the window. She hoped he had noticed the missing flower pot. He must have ... Then she thought, What if he didn't? ... What if he didn't look up?! ...

She knew if she made it through twenty-four hours and tolerated the torture, her friends would have enough time to relocate and would no longer be in danger. Then, she could give the interrogators useless information. She realized that the interrogators knew this, too, and wanted to quickly make her talk. But she had not opened her mouth. Not to speak, and not to scream.

And now, her chest was bursting with screams.

The night before, she had heard their whispers in the dark behind her.

“The guerilla fighter got away again! ... They said he shot a Revolutionary Guard and escaped!”

She didn't dare turn her head to better hear them.

“He shot the man in the face!”

She didn't know if they were talking about Morteza or someone else.

And then, there was nothing but darkness ... and torture in the dead of night, in the hopes that they could make her talk before morning came. They uncuffed her hands and dragged her along and wearily sat her down on a metal chair. The interrogator was circling the chair, cursing at her, beating her, and barking questions. About Morteza, about the team house, about the guerillas and their organization's tactics ...

“Who's your contact? ... Where did you get the leaflets? ... How many were you in that house? ... I'm talking to you, Slut! What's your real name? What school do you go to? ...”

He brought his face close to hers and shouted, and his spit flew on her face and neck ...

When he grew tired, he stepped back and another man yanked her hair from behind and asked the same questions ... His Tea Rose cologne had blended with his sweat and smelled foul ... Then the first man and his vulgar words returned, sat down in front of her, and yelled, “Speak, Slut!”

His breath reeked of tobacco and rotten teeth. He put the tip of his boot on her bare toes and bore down, as though he were putting out a cigarette.

Her face contorted with pain. Something seemed to surge up into her throat. Her mouth gaped, but she didn’t scream.

She felt one of her eyes start to bleed under the blindfold.

She was cold. She longed to go back and huddle next to the radiator, and quietly sleep for a short while.

She leaned her head against the wall. She had not eaten since the day before. Not even water. She felt faint. All she wanted was to lie down on the floor. But she knew the moment one of them showed up, they would start kicking her.

She couldn’t remember the third time that well. It seemed it was near dawn. They had kept her standing and were inundating her with questions. Her knees were bent and she could barely hold up her head. She was exhausted and couldn’t understand the questions ... When blood started trickling from her nose onto her lips, she instinctively raised her hand to wipe it away. One of them punched her on the breast and suddenly she couldn’t breathe ... she had scarcely gasped for air when he kicked her between the legs, and ... she fainted.

When she came to, she was again cuffed to the radiator. She felt wet between her legs. She needed to go to the bathroom. It was an hour later when the interrogator took off her handcuffs and a woman led her to the bathroom. Hard as she tried, she could urinate. It burned ... She only managed a few drops.

“We don’t need any information from you anymore! ... In fact, we don’t want you to say anything at all! ...”

They had again sat her down on the chair. She was in pain, but still held up her head. She knew it was all over. She had said nothing, not a single word. She had not even let out a scream. And now, after those dark hours that seemed to never end, her friends must have abandoned their plans and relocated.

The interrogator furiously pulled at her chador, dragged her to himself, and quietly growled, “After I’m done with you, you will never hold your head up again, Trash.” And he snuffed out his cigarette between her breasts.

“Hai ali al-salaat ... Make haste to prayer ...”

It was the Azan. One of the interrogators was chanting it out of tune.

A pair of slippers scuffed past her. It was probably the prayer leader. Then, the murmurs grew louder and the thumping of boots going back and forth became faster. She held her knees closer and cowered against the wall for fear that they would kick her injured leg.

“Saiid Ali!” someone called out. “It’s time for prayers.”

“I’ll do my ablution and come right away.”

She thought as long as they were busy with prayers, they would leave her alone.

The corridor gradually grew quiet.

She had sat curled up for so long that her legs were numb. She strained to stretch one out. Her knee cracked. She tried to straighten her other leg, but pain speared through her body.

The smell of food drifted into the corridor. She felt faint with hunger. She gently leaned her head against the wall to sleep a little ...

She heard a noise. She opened her eyes under the blindfold and peered into the dark ... She heard slippers quietly shuffling toward her in the empty corridor. She quickly gathered her legs, bent her head down toward her cuffed hands, grabbed the top edge of her chador with her fingertips, and moved her head back to pull the chador down over her forehead. And she sat motionless.

The slippers stopped in front of her.

She swallowed hard.

A hand pushed the chador away from her face and with four fingers pulled up her chin. The fingers were wet.

“You thought you got away, didn’t you?”

It was the interrogator. She thought he must have come to uncuff her and take her to be tortured again.

He pulled open her chador and one by one undid the buttons on her shirt ...

Her heart was racing ... She thought he wanted to frighten her.

When the cold, wet hands reached her waistband, she was about to shout, What are you doing? But the interrogator shoved a piece of cloth in her mouth and tore down her pants.

She struggled, thrashed about, locked her knees, and beat her head back against the wall. She fought and groaned ... but her hands were tied ... her eyes ... her mouth ... her frail body ...

She could hear his raunchy grunts as he moved up and down on her body ... his dark hands groped her... pain coursed through her veins ... as though she were being flogged from the inside ...

And his body collapsed, crushing her.

When the interrogator was done, he pulled up her pants, buttoned her shirt, and threw the chador back over her head. Then he took the dirty rag out her mouth ... and he left.

Her breaths and sobs came in spasms ... something was seething and rising inside her ... her mouth instinctively opened, and she screamed ... screamed ... screamed ...

Chapture 2

I'm Morteza. I beg on the streets for money. I play the accordion. Sing *The King of Hearts*. When I was two, my stepmother blinded me. She burned my eyes with salt so that she could take me with her to beg for alms. I'm Mehri. My interrogator raped me in the prison corridor. My hands were cuffed. I fought hard. I was only seventeen. I screamed. A lot. I'm Morteza. My friend's throat was slashed with a wire while he was on guard duty at the front. The sergeant said it was probably a woman. Poor Amir. He wanted to become a painter. Some nights I hear him in the throes of death, out there in the snow. I'm Mehri. I've been buried under rubble for twenty-seven years. In Rudbar, Bam, Kermanshah. When the earthquakes hit, wreckage poured down on me. My fingers remained poking out of the dirt. The loaders are put to work at night. Plans are to build a recreational complex on top of me. I hear my son's voice every day, still searching for me. How I miss him. Don't cry, my son. I'm Morteza. My lover was unfaithful to me, for money. She was having an affair with a rich engineer. A fat engineer. She said she was sorry. She cried a lot. Asked me to forgive her. But she was still lying. I don't remember her face any more. I'm Morteza. My torturer tore off my fingernails with a pair of pliers, because of a single sentence in my book. I still feel the pain. They put me in solitary confinement for seven months. Sometimes I clawed at the walls with loneliness. I'm Mehri. A social worker assigned to a girl who sells chewing gum at an intersection. I learned she was pregnant by her hustler. She was only eleven. Poor Nargess. Her mother saw Agha go to her every night, but she was too afraid to say anything. I'm Morteza. I'm a guerilla fighter. I shot a Revolutionary Guard. When I saw that our all-safe signal wasn't there, I made a run for it. The guards chased me as far as some woman's house. One of them suspected I was hiding there. He used the cold as an excuse to

come inside. At one point I realized he was molesting the woman, but the poor thing was too frightened to protest. I think her husband had been executed. She was wearing black. I couldn't bear it any more. I shot him in the face from behind a pile of bedding. I'm Morteza. Amir's friend. He's a street kid like me. At night, he sleeps on piles of garbage in back-alleys. He has hung around addicts for so long that he's gotten hooked, too. Poor Amir. Once Agha beat him so much that he broke his arm. I'm Mehri. It makes my skin crawl if a girl, a chadori one at that, gropes me. But no matter what, I had to develop those two rolls of film. Those shocking photographs. I was in love with that photographer waiting outside the darkroom door. I tolerated it because of him, his photographs. I hate the smell of her breath. I'm Morteza. When I quit the organization, they wanted to purge me. There was a girl I had been in love with since my teens. I ran into her on the train. She told me to go to her cabin. I had no idea what was going on. She sounded choked up. Then she cried and said, "Run! It's a trap!" And suddenly someone leaped on me. He had a knife. He slashed my hand. Blood. Blood. I don't know who pulled the emergency brake. I fell on top of him and he lost his knife in the dark. I strangled him until he started to wheeze. I'm Morteza. A girl with AIDS infected me. I was really drunk that night. I made some wisecrack at her. One of those rich girls whose father is a government stooge. She wanted to get back at me. She found me in bed. I didn't know who it was, so hot and horny. Until I grabbed at her stomach. Her bellybutton ring tore off. It was a seahorse. I still vomit. I'm Mehri. I sheltered a guerilla fighter. The Revolutionary Guard out in the yard seemed to have caught on. He came inside. He said he was cold. When he saw me breastfeeding my baby, he came over to me. He was pawing my breast with his rough hands. I was choking back my tears, too afraid to say anything, when suddenly the guerilla blindly shot his gun. I was in shock and my baby was screaming. I grabbed her and ran out in the snow with the guerilla fighter. I'm

Morteza. I was eight or nine when one night during the bombardments, our upstairs neighbor held me by the hand to take me down to the basement. There, in the dark, he sat me down on his lap and pushed my hand down his pants. My heart was racing. My knees were knocking. I wanted to run to my mom. I'm Mehri. My husband was in prison. I didn't see him for six years. He had fallen into their hands because of one of his books. I called him, I begged him to sign whatever they wanted so that they'd set him free. But he wouldn't. I still shudder when I see the scars of the lashes on his back and the soles of his feet. I'm Morteza. I was playing with my friends when they hung me, because they thought my mom was Baha'i. They left me there. The rope was around my neck and the stool was giving way under me. One of their dads showed up. I could hear him. He knew I was choking, but he didn't come down there. He told his son, "Run home! Say nothing. It was just a game. Understand?" I'm Morteza. When the earthquake hit, my friend's entire family died under the rubble. Poor Amir. He couldn't bear it. A few days later, he committed suicide with a gun. Someone took his motorcycle. I sometimes hear it in the distance. I'm Mehri. My husband had me stoned because I was unfaithful to him. I didn't love him. He knew. He threw the first stone. I made love with a man I adored. With him, I learned the meaning of pleasure. Then the others threw stones. Stones. I'm Morteza. During the riots at the university one of the revolutionary Guards who was constantly hollering kicked me in the chest and broke my ribs. I was taking photographs when he caught sight of me. It was by chance that I was in the dormitory that night. They raided, battered, burned, and killed. Poor Amir. They took me to prison along with the others. Some forty of us crammed into a hundred fifty square foot cell. Yes, the interrogators raped several of us. I'm Mehri. I became the organization's sexual snare. They wanted me to lure someone I once loved into my cabin on the train so that they could butcher him. I thought he was the one who had sold out my brother. I had cramps. He lay down

next to me. I was wearing perfume. He whispered the name of the person who had betrayed my brother. He said the guy gave away a lot of names under torture. I told him, “Run! It’s a trap!” Then there was blood. Blood. I’m Morteza. My wife is buried under rubble, and I shout her name day and night. I’ve been searching for her for twenty-seven years. I know she’s alive. I’m Mehri. I was in the women’s ward for two years waiting for my sentence. I made friends with Nargess there. She had killed her husband because he beat her every night. Poor Nargess. They hanged her in the prison yard.

I’m Morteza. It seems I’m standing on a rickety stool ...

Chapter 16

He is standing on a stack of books with a rope around his neck. The room is pitch-black and his eyes are closed. The melancholy tune of a *kamancheh* is playing on the cell phone he has tossed in a corner. He is reflecting on darkneses. His heart is beating calmly now.

That night, after he taped the last pages of the magazines to the window and the room turned dark, he felt his way over to the books he had arranged on top of each other. He carefully put one foot on the pile and stepped up, and he put the black loop at the end of the rope around his neck.

He had painstakingly selected the volumes and one by one taken them from his library and set them on top of each other—*Madness and Civilization*, Foucault; *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche; *King of the Benighted*, Golshiri; *In the Labyrinth*, Robbe-Grillet; *Tadhkirat-ul-Awliyā*, Attar; *Prayer For the Dead*, Daneshvar; *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking; *Fresh Air*, Shamlou; *We Are Here*, Akerey; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud; *Voices From Chernobyl*, Alexievich; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus; *Labyrinths*, Borges ...

His bare feet are sweaty. He is worried that the cover of the book he is standing on might crimple and crease.

He had thought of Mehri. Of the moment the truck ran head-on into her fragile car, into her fragile body, and the steering wheel crushed her chest. He was anxious about his friend who chain-smoked and constantly coughed on the phone. And, no one knew yet that his teenage son had leukemia. When the doctor told him it was incurable, he had thought of the sea, of the two of them sailing far away, jumping into the water and not struggling at all. When his friend's mother died, he felt as though his own mother had died all over again, and he remembered her hands as

she darned his sister's coverall. A year earlier, his girlfriend, a poet who had long suffered from depression, had committed suicide in her rented apartment on Bahar Street. He had heard that another friend who lived abroad had lost the function of his kidneys and had been under dialysis for some time.

How distant seemed the news of Amir's execution in the prison yard and the image of those mass graves, or his own father's death from a knife wound to the throat during an altercation on the street.

For a few years now, he had stopped reading books on astrology. Even classical music agitated and unnerved him.

He had always had ample philosophical pessimism for depression and anxiety, but he had also occasionally deceived himself. Now and then, he had emerge from his dark cave and resigned himself to simple daily routines ... but it was useless. And he had again slipped back into his darkness.

He knew one day the entire world will become a wasteland. He knew one day the moon will leave its orbit, and it will either collide with the earth or move away, and this beautiful, meaningless life will end. He knew millions of years from now, the sun will grow so cold and large that it will devour the earth as if it were nothing but a tiny seed. And nothing will remain. Nothing.

He was afraid of looking at the moon.

But all the miseries that had come crashing down on him would break him even sooner.

Outside, summer left and autumn arrived. October, November, December ...

How quickly time passes!

It's cold.

His legs have numbed ...

He is persistently tempted to knock over the books with a single jolt and hang himself, and done. Or no, to wait until he slowly grows old and suffers a heart attack or develops Alzheimer's and dies.

He wanted to hang himself, not because of his lover's treachery or because he had been fired from the university and replaced by one of his own dumb students, and not because of his ruthless landlord who had again raised his rent at the beginning of the year or the policeman on the street who had pounded him on his chest with the palm of his hand ... No ... Even though these old wounds in his being, in his soul, would never heal.

He was anguished because of the woman buried under rubble, albeit she wasn't his wife. Because of the child whose body was riddled with shrapnel during the war and was afraid of dying without knowing what death was. Because of the man whose home was washed away by the floods. Because of the skinny girl who stepped on a mine and lost her legs. Because of the young man who had no money for train fare.

It's difficult feeling suspended in this beautiful, futile world since the age of twelve and suffering the anxiety of existence until the brink of death.

The sound of the cell phone ringing interrupts the music of the *kamancheh*. After four rings, the voicemail activates. He cannot hear the person on the other end of the line, but it seems he is coughing.
