

Chapter 1

May 3, 1977, Tehran University, Tehran

IT WAS ONE of those bright, windy May days, and Amineh, carrying a picnic basket, did not notice at first the small anti-shah demonstration outside the dorms of Tehran University. For the briefest of moments, she considered showing her support—her best friend, Ava, would not have hesitated—but instead, she took a detour to a side street that would mean walking three extra blocks.

Amineh heard the approaching police sirens and increased her pace on the root-damaged sidewalk. She hurried past a stalled truck spewing noxious fumes and around three students wearing miniskirts and trendy haircuts.

Suddenly she stopped. There was no mistaking that sweet, spicy scent. It was coming from the pink rosebush on the side of the building—the damask. Immediately, Amineh was transported to her family’s rose orchard and the desert village where she’d grown up. It was May, she realized, harvest time, when the fragrance hung so heavy in the village you could taste it. She could still see her mother’s satisfaction as she added the last petals and pistachios to her famous harvest cake, which she then drenched in warm rose syrup. A fast-moving cloud swept over the sun, and Amineh shivered as another memory encroached.

Amineh caught sight of her friend Ava waving from the entrance of Farah Park. She switched her picnic basket to the other hand and waved back.

“WELL, THERE SHE IS!” Ava said when Amineh reached her.

Amineh smiled at Ava’s new pixie cut, which so suited her. “Sorry you had to wait.”

Ava adjusted her green miniskirt and gestured to the magnolia blooms behind her. "It's hardly waiting when I get to hang out here!"

Amineh kissed Ava on both cheeks and hugged her tightly. She thought of the brilliant timing that had brought her and Ava to the same bus on the first day of university despite their being in different schools. She had done something she didn't usually do; she had sat next to Ava rather than alone, and they had been inseparable since then. Ava was Amineh's opposite—confident, talkative, vivacious—but Amineh felt far closer to her than to her own sister.

The friends linked arms and walked on a path leading through the windy park. They headed toward a large sycamore, and Amineh helped Ava lay out the blanket and drinks she had brought. They took off their shoes and settled themselves on the blanket. Amineh shielded her eyes from the sun as she watched the strong breeze blow the leaves.

"Some students were demonstrating outside of the dorms," Amineh said.

"That's fantastic. Who were they?"

"I don't know. It was a pretty small group, but I heard sirens."

"There will be demonstrations all over the place soon, and the SAVAK won't be able to arrest everyone. Guess what? A group of big-shot lawyers just published an open letter protesting the shah's interfering in the judiciary. I would have signed it if they had asked me!"

Amineh transferred her dishes to the blanket.

"We should have invited twenty more people," Ava quipped. "This looks amazing, Amineh!"

"Some of this is from the dinner I made my landlady, Mrs. Moaveni. You can take some home with you." Amineh looked up at her friend. "Are you serious you would sign, even after what they did to Tahmures?"

"Nothing is ever going to get better unless we're willing to risk everything," Ava said. "But before we say another word, Amineh, have you decided if you're coming with me to the gathering on Thursday? Say yes! Pleeeease."

Amineh could think of nothing she would enjoy less, and she was close to saying so, but it was impossible with her friend looking at her like that, as if all Ava's happiness depended on her answer.

"I'll come," she finally told Ava. "For you." The gravity in Amineh's voice reflected her devotion to her best friend.

"It's for Tahmures."

"What? Now they're using his death to gain points?"

"He was murdered, Amineh," said Ava, her tone gentle rather than critical. "Who are we if we don't stand up for him, make something of his sacrifice?"

Amineh didn't see how listening to Ava's law school friends get into an ideological debate would do anything for Tahmures, but she was awed by the earnestness that shone in Ava's eyes. Amineh often wished that she could approach life a little more like Ava did, breaking everything down into practical bite-sized pieces so it could be digested quickly and always with enthusiasm and conviction. For Amineh, life was complicated. The freedom she dared for herself came in short bursts, usually inspired by Ava's ready energy. Most other times, she was ambivalent, not quite knowing how to add the world up, for it seemed to be made up of disparate qualities and characteristics rather than clear, concrete forms. This characteristic did not make her a convincing activist. Unlike the extroverted Ava, Amineh cherished reading more than anything. Just now, she was interested in Sohrab Sepehri, a poet from Kashan, not far from where she had grown up. When she read his poetry, she imagined her father sitting in Sepehri's courtyard, discussing the same poem: "One must run until the end of being. . . . One must sit close to the unfolding, some place between rapture and illumination." Her father would ask a pointed question, and Sepehri would struggle to convey the subtlety with which he approached his mystical journey. Her father gave life to all of Amineh's studies. Her eyes were his eyes and her reading his reading. Her father's books had been her lifeline that first year after her parents' deaths, and they had continued to make her feel close to him. Books were the closest thing she had to home. She didn't have a complete picture of her father's politics, only that he had cared for the dispossessed. What would he think of the opposition movement? She was sure he would support the aspirations of most of the groups as they sought equality and freedom, although she doubted that he would give time to the religious conservatives. How often

had her grandmother complained that her son had not conformed better to orthodoxy? She would mutter he had been her own Mansur Hallaj, as if his free, God-loving spirit somehow explained his early demise.

And how had their friend Tahmures managed to get himself killed? Amineh had always considered the shy, pale figure who sometimes joined them for hikes the type of person who would go through life without making a ripple. That he had turned out to be the author of *The Art of Revolution* and had become, thereby, a leading symbol of the opposition movement was as astonishing to her as if he had visited the moon. It had been two weeks since their professor had announced the news of his death, but Amineh still expected to see Tahmures in the hallway: he would shift his thin frame and flat feet and explain it had been a misunderstanding.

Ava drenched her bread in the eggplant dip. "This is so delicious, Amineh. How do you cook like this?"

"You have to know what your ingredients respond best to." Amineh laughed as Ava made a face. "It's true! Roasting eggplant brings out its round, creamy taste."

Ava chewed. "So that's your trick, knowing your vegetables? Do you give names to them too?"

"Of course."

"So, who are we eating today?"

"Jamshid."

Laughter shook the girls as they lay on the picnic blanket. Amineh swept an ant away and picked a blade of grass, which she twirled between her fingers.

Although Amineh knew she was a better cook than many of her classmates, it still felt strange whenever anyone praised her culinary skills. Her grandmother could spend an entire dinner pointing out what was wrong with each dish Amineh had prepared. Part of this was that her grandmother didn't like anyone deviating from her beloved recipes, but still, if Amineh had listened to her criticisms, she would not have had the confidence to boil an egg.

"So, how's your writing going?" Ava asked.

“Slow. I have too much coursework right now.”

“Maybe one day you should do a recipe book—teach all of us how to cook—although I think we would benefit from a novel that advocates for women’s rights.”

“That’s not really what my novel’s about.”

“From everything you have told me, it certainly sounds like it is. We need a book like yours right now.”

Amineh had not thought of her novel in activist terms, and this lapse bothered her. Was she wrong to write a book that did not serve the opposition, that did not at least address a social justice issue? The political tension at her school was increasing, and it suddenly seemed frivolous to be focused on roses and a life that had long been gone.

“Did you know Tahmures told me that violence wasn’t always wrong?” Ava asked. “He said that sometimes something terrible had to happen before change was even possible.”

Amineh shuddered. Had Tahmures been planning something? Was that why they had killed him? She could still not believe this was the same Tahmures who had nearly fainted when Ava had sliced her finger with a paring knife while they were picnicking. How they had teased him! He had asked them to stop, and they had, his face surprising Amineh, making her feel mean spirited. She recoiled at her vision of him in prison, the torture he must have endured.

Ava rested her cheek on Amineh’s arm. “It’s almost like he knew he would die.”

They sat in silence. The wind had increased, and the clouds made patterns on the picnic blanket. The rush of light and darkness had an ominous aspect—a hostile wresting of life’s natural cadence.

“Dariush is hosting,” Ava said.

Amineh caught the trace of uncertainty in Ava’s voice and frowned. Amineh had for some time suspected Ava was infatuated with Dariush, and she was sure her friend could do better. He seemed too self-absorbed to appreciate how much more there was to Ava than her beauty.

“Have you noticed he blinks his eyes before he speaks?” Amineh asked.

“No, he doesn’t! I’ve never seen that!”

“Yes, he does. He has a little tick, and he also bites his left thumb. Mother issues, I’m sure. . . .”

“You’re being mean!”

“So, promise me this is not some crush—”

Ava hid her face in her arms. “Oof. I don’t know.”

Amineh caressed Ava’s hair, promising herself that she would keep an eye on both Ava and Dariush.

The sound of police sirens reached them. Amineh thought of the demonstration and wondered if Ava was right, that there would come a time when the shah’s secret police would be helpless against the sheer number of people who thought as Ava did: that the cause was worth losing everything.

Chapter 2

May 5, 1977, Qeytarieh, Tehran

AVA AND AMINEH arrived at Dariush's house for the party thirty minutes late. Dariush greeted them at the door and courteously waved off their apologies.

To Amineh's surprise, he directed his attention toward her. "I'm so glad you came, Amineh. I know how important it was to Ava."

Amineh was disturbed by Dariush's use of her to communicate his affection for Ava—and if the giddy shine in Ava's eyes was anything to go by, it had worked. Ava squeezed Amineh's arm as they followed Dariush into the large marble foyer of his family's house. He escorted them through the inner courtyard and another doorway and down the stairs to a smoky basement packed with students. Chairs lined the wood-paneled walls, but most people stood and faced the deep-voiced speaker who was addressing the crowd from a makeshift platform set up in front of a bookcase.

Amineh recognized the woman in a blue miniskirt and leather boots—Ava's friend from law school. Close by was another girl, who had been in one of Amineh's literature classes. The girl leaned against the wall wearing a large olive-green shirt over loose trousers. She was a communist, but Amineh knew little else about her as she rarely spoke in class. Their eyes met and Amineh lifted her fingers in a wave that received a bare nod in response.

Ava nudged Amineh's arm in agreement with a point the speaker had just made. Amineh turned back to the podium. The speaker was older and dressed more formally than anyone else, but he could not have been more at ease.

“Freedom is not a luxury reserved for the privileged few in the shah’s circle,” he declared. “It is a part of our natural right, as interwoven in our nature as the very right to draw on the oxygen around us.” He had an assuredness in his tone, almost a joy, as if all the aspects of his life were perfectly aligned, as if this basement filled with a motley group of students was exactly where he was supposed to be.

When he finished, Dariush beckoned him over. Amineh had been content observing the speaker from a distance and now felt self-conscious meeting him. He had seemed so powerful on the podium that she was surprised when he turned out to be far shorter than Dariush and only a few inches taller than herself.

“This is my cousin, Farzad Rezai.” Dariush’s eyes blinked in rapid succession, and Amineh looked at Ava to see whether she had noticed. “He’s a lawyer and a physicist working for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran. He’s a big help with our movement, and he’s a gifted speaker. I’m sorry you missed the beginning.”

Farzad possessed a forceful chin, prominent nose, and broad forehead, not features attractive in themselves, but somehow each characteristic of his face pleased Amineh. His masculine looks made him accessible to her in a way his oratory prowess did not.

Amineh held out her hand. “We’re sorry we were late.”

He stared at her as if trying to place her. His eyes, she thought, had a warm yet piercing quality, a flash of steel both intense and intimate.

“Are you also in the law program?” he asked.

“Literature.”

“Planning to teach?”

“Maybe, not sure.”

He didn’t respond to this, only kept reading her.

Ava jumped into the conversation. “Tell us what we missed!”

“I referred to the shah’s overstepping of the powers given to him by the constitution, the main point being, of course, he shouldn’t be involved in government. I addressed the need for a constitutional democracy with independent institutions, a parliament representing the people.”

Ava smiled. "Did you mention that while he couldn't afford to feed starving Iranians, he could afford to throw one of the world's most glamorous parties to celebrate twenty-five hundred years of the Persian Empire?"

Farzad caught Amineh's eye as he answered Ava. "I did."

Dariush snorted. "Royals from all over the world raising their glasses of Dom Pérignon while they dined on truffles and peacock flown in from France."

"I read they slept in silk tents with marble bathrooms!" Amineh said.

"They needed to sit their royal asses down somewhere," Ava said.

Farzad leaned his head back and laughed, and Amineh thought he could almost be called handsome.

A young man approached. Dariush stepped aside to speak with him. Then Dariush returned with a packet, which he gave to Farzad. "We've all signed it," Dariush said.

He turned to Amineh. "It's a petition we drafted asking the Ministry of Justice for an official inquiry into Tahmures's death." His eyes met Farzad's. "We did our best, but, well, any prominent names would make it, well, you know—"

"Yes, of course," Farzad said. "I'll fill it with as many as I can from my end, including mine." He smiled as he said this, as if to color his words with modesty.

Dariush hugged Farzad in a spontaneous, almost childlike gesture of affection.

Amineh was surprised by this new side of Dariush's character. It also had not escaped her how Farzad had received the embrace. He had been moved by the unexpected gesture, didn't think himself worthy of it, but had returned it generously.

A diminutive older man approached. Dariush turned serious. "Ava, Amineh, this is Naser Hosseini. He is Tahmures's father, and he works with Farzad."

Farzad nodded. "We've known each other since we were kids."

The man had a pinched appearance and deep circles under his eyes. Amineh could see where Tahmures had gotten both his looks and

demeanor. Naser was distressed, and after he held his hand to his heart in greeting, Farzad quickly escorted him to an empty seat in the corner.

Ava shook her head. "I feel so sorry for him."

"He's beside himself," Dariush said.

Amineh was watching the kindly way Farzad was tending to Naser. "Is there anything we can do?" she asked.

"There is only one thing he wants, and that's the one thing we can't give him," Dariush said, his eyes locking on Ava's. He excused himself.

A lovesick flush rose on Ava's cheeks. Amineh took Ava's arm as Dariush got up on the makeshift podium and introduced the next speaker—another one of Tahmures's friends. The student took Dariush's place, said a few hasty sentences about Tahmures, then arrived at his point: "The Marxists have gone too far with their lies. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is the only one who truly speaks for the oppressed, and it's time to show our allegiance! Cowards out! We must be ready to give our blood!"

A wave of approval spread around the room.

A woman stood on a chair and shouted, "We need to send the shah to the grave, just like he did to Tahmures!"

Dariush took the microphone from the speaker. "Look, we're all angry, but the message we're honoring tonight is unity. It's there we find our strength, not in attacking each other." Dariush held up a stack of papers. "We're distributing Tahmures's treatise, *The Art of Revolution*. Only take it with you, of course, if you're comfortable."

"Look where it got Tahmures!" barked a voice. "They want to do the same to us. Should we just let them do it?"

The rest of the audience seemed to agree heartily with this point.

Dariush had difficulty raising his voice above the noise in the room. "Spilled blood will only spill more. Let's try to respect and honor Tahmures's memory. Few haven't felt the shah's heavy hand, and we can represent everyone—there's no stronger power than all of us together!"

A stocky man held his hands up to his mouth. "We need Shariati!"

"We don't need the Prophet in our politics!"

"Marx!"

Amineh absorbed the competing views and felt that she too should stand square footed and proclaim her position. She knew that when Tahmures's friend had referred to "the oppressed," he had been talking about the plight of laborers in the provincial villages, and she was from such a village. Shouldn't she try to weave some aspect of this into her novel—how hard it was for Qasem to compete against the large commercial farmers, how Hoseyn Aqa's sons had given up trying to make a profit out of their roses, and how the school she had gone to kept losing teachers and principals because their salaries did not provide enough to live? Wasn't this her duty?

Ava squeezed Amineh's arm as Dariush got down from the podium and approached them. Farzad returned to Amineh and Ava at the same time.

"I thought this would be easier," Dariush said.

Farzad patted Dariush's back supportively. "You know, I meant to tell you this: I spoke to a group of construction workers the other day, and they said they stood behind the Islamic opposition, and while that is not surprising, their rationale was far more pragmatic than I expected it to be." Farzad's gaze moved from his cousin to Ava and finally to Amineh. "For many of these men, it's simple. They equate religion with equality. They are tired of being the underclass, working for nothing, not having any control over their lives."

"I do think we're too focused on money and power," Ava said. "In Qom, the Shi'a scholars spend years contemplating the questions of life. What would be so wrong about having their views represented?" She glanced sideways at Amineh. "Not everyone agrees with me."

"No, some of us would probably prefer drinking donkey's blood to spending five minutes with some of the mullahs out there," Amineh said. She had only to think of her grandmother and the series of mullahs she'd enlisted to target whoever had displeased her.

Farzad, Dariush, and Ava laughed heartily, and Amineh felt foolish. She didn't know what had possessed her to speak like that. It was as if all her emotions had come out in a backcountry belch.

Amineh struggled to appear unperturbed. "What do you think of Khomeini?" she asked Farzad.

“He’s popular and a great tactician, but he doesn’t value political freedom.” He smiled at her, but what did his smile mean?

Ava looked skeptical. “I thought he sees his role as an advisor.”

“He’s too strong-minded to have a minor role,” Farzad said. “He wants too much.”

“Just to be clear, I do respect Muslim theologians,” Amineh said. “It’s mixed is all I meant to say. Just because you’re a mullah doesn’t mean you’re enlightened.”

Ava held Amineh’s shoulder. “I’m sure these men understand you’re a complex and nuanced individual and don’t form rash judgments about any one group.”

Amineh searched her mind desperately but could think of nothing to say to make herself appear sophisticated and at ease.

Just then, Naser approached. “I must leave,” he said, almost inaudibly. “My wife is expecting me home.”

Dariush took Naser’s hand in his. “Thank you for being here.”

Amineh was filled with sadness looking at Naser, so like Tahmures but debilitated—a tree whose prized limb has been severed. He stood silent, angry, maimed.

Farzad took Naser’s shoulder. “I’ll accompany you. Can you wait?”

When he nodded, Farzad asked if he could speak to Amineh privately.

Amineh was caught off guard and took a calming breath as she accompanied Farzad to a less occupied spot in the room.

Farzad searched for words. “I don’t usually go to events like this trying to pick up women.” His grin was lopsided, self-conscious. “I realize I’m a little older than you, than your friends here, so if that troubles you, I understand, but I want to assure you I’m—”

“Decent,” Amineh interjected.

Farzad’s smile broadened. “Yes, thank you. I am. Dariush, I think, can vouch for me.” He paused. “So, can I call you?”

Amineh gave him her number, trying to ignore the heat creeping up her ears.

He finished writing. “I must leave now, and you and Ava should consider doing the same. Dariush’s friends are on the lookout for the SAVAK,

but it would be better not to be here at all, for both your sakes. The SAVAK is not a fan of these types of meetings.” He met her eyes.

Amineh watched Farzad’s back as he left. Her head was still impossibly hot, but she couldn’t help noticing the attractive shape of those grand shoulders and narrow hips. There was something so comforting, even familiar, about the self-assured, cheerful way he carried himself, and she felt oddly moved.

Chapter 3

Five Years Earlier

August 1973, Qamsar, Iran

AMINEH WAS THE last to sign the lease agreement. The document had been couriered around the globe to her brother and sister, and now it was Amineh's turn. She added her signature and looked up at her father's cousin, Qasem. She didn't know what she expected to find in his expression—some assurance perhaps that she was doing the right thing—but his face was inscrutable.

Qasem took the agreement from her. "There. Well, that's settled then, isn't it? You off to Tehran and me . . ." He opened his arms in a sweeping half-moon shape that enveloped the rose farm. The self-satisfaction in that gesture produced a feeling of revulsion in her.

Qasem tilted his head and examined Amineh as if seeing her for the first time. "You look like your mother, you know. I always thought you took after your father, but no, you're the exact image of her."

Amineh bowed her head, and not trusting herself to say anything else, she left. She walked down the hallway trying to convince herself her parents would approve. Qasem was the natural choice to take over the farm. Without Qasem, they would not have been able to keep the business afloat these last ten years, especially after her brother choose the University of London and her sister moved to Tehran with her husband. Amineh had never considered following her siblings, as she knew her grandmother wouldn't be able to manage the farm without her. Her grandmother had lost the help of both Amineh's father and mother when they were killed, and the guilt over that weighed heavily. That didn't mean, however, that Amineh was willing to submit to an arranged marriage. Thankfully, the

departure of her sister and brother had so shocked her grandmother that she had quickly turned down all suitors once she learned they did not want to remain in Qamsar.

Her grandmother's death had changed everything.

Qasem had traveled from Paris when he heard the news, and Amineh had been grateful that he would stay on another week after mourning. The house had been so full of people, prayers, Qur'anic readings, and talk of a husband that the quiet that followed, though welcome, felt strange. She had made tea for Qasem, but he was no longer in the house. She went out into the garden and was startled to see him in her father's spot under the pomegranate tree. Even after all those years, it still was difficult seeing someone else sit there. She served him tea and was about to leave when he asked if she would join him. She detected discomfort in his voice. She had barely sat down when he announced he wanted to move back to Qamsar. He spoke quickly and defensively, as if needing to convince not only Amineh but also his absent wife and children that his decision was sound.

He had returned to Iran so many times in the past twenty years to participate in the harvest and help with operations not only because he had a duty to Amineh's family but also because his heart had never left the village. The roses, he said, were his dearest passion, and he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life taking care of them. He was the one who had acquired all their Parisian perfume contracts and said no to the companies that had wanted to lower the price, push efficiency, and compromise quality. Before she could fully digest this news, Qasem had said he wanted to take over the farm. He told her it was wrong for a young woman to live alone and to do the work of an old man, to not meet people her own age, to not accept the proposal of a husband, but Amineh was no longer listening, for something new in her had taken form.

AMINEH OPENED THE door to her room and sat on the bed. She felt sick, a feeling far from the excitement she had experienced waking up. This was her last day before leaving for Tehran to start her literature studies. For years she had dreamed of writing a book about her parents, but while she

had slowly gathered information over the years, she had not considered herself qualified to start such a project. Now she would gain the skills and experience she needed.

She took out the photo of her parents she had wrapped in a scarf. Her mother had had a natural beauty with wide eyes and generous lips that had comfortably accommodated a contented smile, and Qasem's suggestion that Amineh might have a little of that pleased her.

Amineh looked around the tidy space. She had carried armfuls of her father's books back to his bookcase, and it was this more than anything else that made the room feel so desolate. Of all her father's books, she had taken only the journal he had kept on his desk, empty except for an inscription written in his neat hand: "Proba te dignum" (Prove yourself worthy). It was Latin rather than Persian. Had he ever fallen short of that motto? Amineh's mind waded through her past, catching images, emotions, but mostly feeling the tightness of the walls. Abruptly, she stood.

She walked outside to the narrow dirt path she had loved as a child, her fingers tracing the warm adobe wall that turned cool the moment she stepped under the lush green canopy. She stopped at the towering fig tree. Her grandmother's instructions were imprinted in her memory: she must take the cobbled street straight to the market, not dally, and never stray into Hoseyn Aqa's orchard. Disobeying these instructions was one of Amineh's few rebellions.

She squeezed through the gap in the wall, walked past the algae-covered pool, past the overgrown rosebushes, and past the one-room building Hoseyn Aqa's boys had slept in during harvest time. In front of her was the makeshift partition that still held its position above a lively and oblivious stream. What a raucous battle had been waged by Hoseyn Aqa and her grandmother over that structure. He had been so enraged with her grandmother for claiming that a slice of his property was hers that he had made his sons build the structure almost overnight. Her grandmother had responded by calling him a greedy insect and told the mullahs and anyone else who would listen that he had usurped her land. It would be a locust invasion in the end that would cost Hoseyn Aqa his rose garden, along with city-minded sons who wanted nothing to do with his roses.

Amineh followed a tiny path through a fig orchard till she stepped out into a rocky, sandy expanse. She was on property now owned by Karim, the Hazara from Afghanistan who had acquired land of theirs no one else wanted as it was on the mountain where the desert held claim. Shortly after her grandmother's death, he had surprised Amineh with a bag of dried black limes. He had refused to accept any payment from her, only repeating in broken Persian that her mother had always asked for his limes, and she would want Amineh to have them. Amineh couldn't tell whether the soil was just right or whether the brine he soaked them in was of particularly good quality, but his limes were superb. As soon as she cut open one of the withered black orbs, that dark, sweet piquancy transported her to her mother's side where warm, quick hands had first given her that exquisite taste. Amineh prepared *khoresht* that very day, using three whole pierced fruits.

In the distance she could see Karim's skinny rows of rosebushes. They looked humble beneath the desert sun yet still unshakable, like those desert acacias whose proof of strength lay in their very existence. It hardly seemed possible that Karim had managed to make a business of his roses, but his rose water was now among the best in the village.

Amineh began her climb to the top of the ridge. It was there that the desert spoke most to her.

Amineh had reached the area just above Karim's rosebushes. She relished the sensation of the wind sweeping in front of her, behind her, catching and whipping her hair. Thistles caught at her ankles, but she didn't mind. The desert was the closest thing she knew to happiness. She felt a surge of contentment under the empty sky, in the white heat, among the barren folds of rock and sand, where solitariness itself was natural, even laudable.

She stopped to catch her breath.

The sun was fire.

Amineh had done everything she could to make her grandmother's last days comfortable, but her grandmother had dismissed her efforts as she did anything Amineh ever did or felt. She had tried to reason with her, telling her grandmother she didn't need to find her a husband before she

died, that the husband she had found in such haste made her stomach turn, but it hadn't made a difference. She had gone ahead and invited his family to their house when she was too ill to receive them.

Amineh had to turn them away at the door.

The wind blew more intensely now, assailing her ears, hitting her face with hard grains of sand. She closed her eyes to slits and continued on the path she had taken countless times. Her foot slipped, and her clumsiness, the resistance she felt from the mountain, alarmed her. How could she not have noticed the sea of unanchored stones she was caught in? She looked up to see that several boulders had been displaced and were blocking her route. She tried to step in the other direction, but the stones gave way and she stopped, locked in a dizzying spell of uncertainty. How strange the mountain felt to her, like a friend one knows well who reveals some terrible new aspect.

She took another step and grabbed the ledge above her, using her knee to lift her body. The new vantage point allowed her to find another route that would lead her to the summit. After several ungainly starts, she began to make progress, working at a diagonal until she finally pulled herself over the last protrusion to the top.

Amineh stood on that little crag.

The village seemed to melt into something much bigger and grander than itself. The mountains, the sand, the water, the sun, the sky, the trees, the grass, the roses, the oasis itself—nothing stood still; everything was in a state of change, ceaselessly reshaping itself into something better and more noble.

A falcon soared above her, but its freedom was not hers. Her nature belonged to the sand and rocks of the mountain. She did not have to be told her journey would be difficult—her life had already taught her that. And still her voyage would lead her to places beyond her imagination, and thus, it would have been too much to ask her not to feel excitement and even a small grain of hope. Standing there, with the village at her feet and the world spread out before her, she felt just reckless enough to believe that she would be welcome somewhere, even belong, that she would be given one more chance to prove herself.

Chapter 4

May 9, 1977, Tehran

IT WAS FIVE days since Farzad had asked for her number, and he still had not called.

She had heard classmates speak about calls from boys or lack thereof, and Amineh had never dreamed she would experience for herself those alternating bouts of bliss and gloom. She had been stuck on the same page of her thesis for three days.

The air around her felt charged, as if something new was hiding in its folds. She couldn't help wondering if Farzad was the partner she had been seeking without knowing it, but then a terrible thought caught her: her awkwardness had ruined everything.

The doorbell rang and Amineh was relieved when she heard Ava speaking with her landlady, Mrs. Moaveni.

Her friend came into her room, kissed her, and plopped down on her bed.

"What's that smile for?" Amineh asked.

Ava held her eyes for an extended moment as if judging the wisdom of her words. "Dariush wanted me to ask if Farzad has called you."

Amineh's heart twisted as she shook her head. She also had not missed the intimate tone Ava used when mentioning Dariush. "What about you? Has Dariush said how he feels about you?"

Ava smiled secretively. "Yes."

"Well, I'm glad for you, now that I have a better opinion of him."

"That's how Dariush is. He grows on you."

Amineh made a face.

"Do you think Farzad's too old for me?" Amineh asked after a pause.

“He’s brilliant and successful,” offered Ava, “and Dariush loves him. More to the point, however, is what you think.”

“I only just met him,” Amineh said. “I don’t know.”

“You like him.”

“I may dislike him yet,” Amineh said.

“You don’t believe that any more than I do. By the way, you’ve been working so hard these past weeks, and then you do all this cooking. Aren’t you doing too much?”

“I’m fine. Mrs. Moaveni takes money off my rent for helping her with dinner three nights a week.”

“You need a rich husband,” Ava said. “According to Dariush, Farzad does very well for himself.”

“I still have that money I got for my family’s farm. I’m just trying to be smart.”

Amineh squeezed her friend’s hand as they sat together in silence.

“My mom wanted me to get a degree before I married,” Amineh said. “Can you imagine how ahead of her time she was?”

“I would have liked your mom.”

“She would have loved you.”

“You know, if you do end up with Farzad, you would have such an interesting life as Dariush says he disappears for weeks at a time to many different countries. He apparently is a member of some secret fraternity at Oxford.”

“Let’s start with him calling me,” Amineh said.