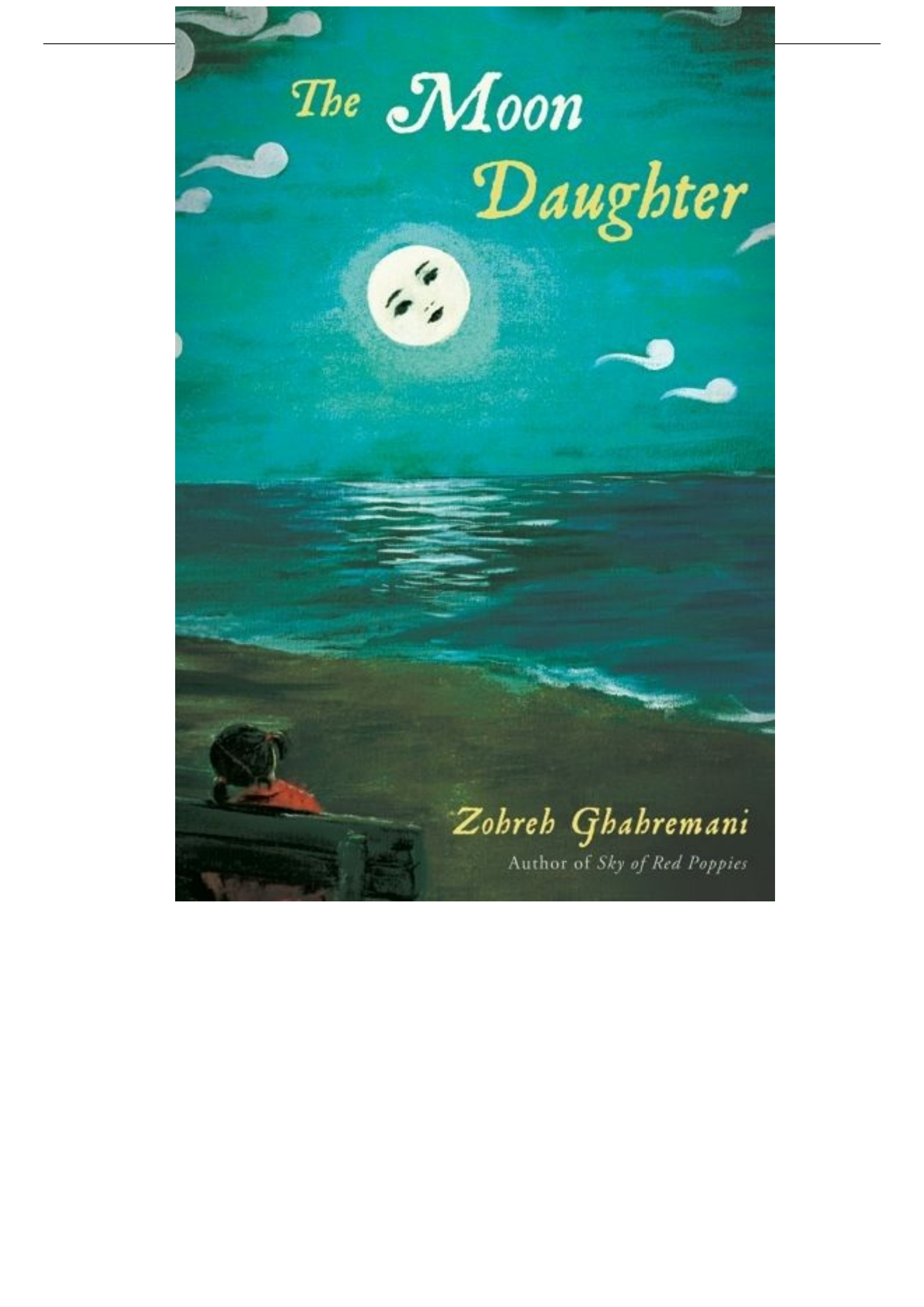




The Moon
Daughter

Zobreh Ghabremani

Author of Sky of Red Poppies



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Praise for Sky of Red Poppies

Sky of Red Poppies walks the reader through stretches of breathtaking and thought-provoking narrative to provide answers to Iran's brilliant past and brutal present. Well worth considering!

—Dr. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, *University of Maryland*

Sky of Red Poppies takes its readers on a fascinating journey through the landscapes of Iran and provides a glimpse into a far too often over-looked side of Iranian culture and history. A must read!

—Melody Moezzi, author of *War on Error*

Ghahremani is that wonderful kind of writer who tells compelling stories in rich and lyrical language. *Sky of Red Poppies* is an illustration of her mastery of both.

—Judy Reeves, author of *A Writer's Book of Days*

Ghahremani understands the many conditions of the human heart... *Sky of Red Poppies* is a compassionate story of universal truths.

—Yvonne Nelson Perry, author of *The Other Side of the Island*

Sky of Red Poppies is the moving story of relationships tested under the most stressful of human conditions, that of a repressive government. Zohreh Ghahremani writes with warmth, humanity and a poet's vision.

—Claire Accomando, author of *Love and Rutabaga*

Set against the backdrop of a pre-revolution Iran, *Sky of Red Poppies* is a poetic epic and a powerful read.

—Jonathan Yang, author of *Exclusively Chloë*

For many years I have had the privilege of publishing Ghahremani's charming, nostalgia-laced words of wisdom on the pages of iranian.com. Now it's time for a broader audience to enjoy a heartfelt journey into a fascinating life.

—Jahanshah Javid, iranian.com

Praise for The Moon Daughter

The Moon Daughter captures the bittersweet yet triumphant story of an Iranian mother and daughter who immigrate to the United States in the 1970s. In this delicately wrought novel, each woman struggles against the hand that fate has dealt her with intelligence and strength, illuminating the path of two very different generations of Iranian Americans. But rather than settle for easy answers, the skillfully-woven tale lays bare the emotional truths at the core of the immigrant experience: the complications afforded by loss, the changes of heart that make us all human, and the power of love to bind us together across continents and generations. *The Moon Daughter* is captivating, heart-felt, and deeply meaningful.

—Anita Amirrezvani, author of *The Blood of Flowers* and *Equal of the Sun*

In her new novel, Zohreh Ghahremani leads her readers into the town of Shiraz which, like its wine, intoxicates us.

—Shahrnush Parsipur, author of *Women Without Men*

Just as in *Sky of Red Poppies*, Zohreh Ghahremani's *The Moon Daughter* offers readers a riveting and poetically rendered window into Iranian culture, this time through the story of a woman and a baby whose flaw speaks to much deeper defects in families and cultures. Prepare to lose sleep--you will not want to put this book down.

—Laurel Corona, author of *Finding Emily* and *The Four Seasons*

"Brilliantly portrayed with vivid imagery, intriguing characters, and lyrical prose, *The Moon Daughter* reveals rare insights from both mother and daughter in their search for love, compassion and justice. At once tragic and triumphant, this spellbinding drama is riveting through the final page."

—Marjorie Hart, author of *Summer at Tiffany*, a New York Times bestseller

This eagerly awaited second novel from the remarkably talented Zohreh Ghahremani... offers readers a glimpse into the troubled lives of women in Iranian culture, past and present, in a voice at once personal and immediate. The author's love of art and poetry animates her prodigious storytelling gift in a powerful exploration of pressing women's issues in Iran, creating a memorable tale of love, revenge and ultimate belonging.

—Kathi Diamant, author of *Kafka's Last Love*

Zohreh Ghahremani's *The Moon Daughter* captures an important period of Iran's tumultuous history and draws a detailed and intimate portrait of the lives of one Iranian family and the changes they endure. Her ability to tell the stories that have not yet been told about Iran enriches the fictional landscape of American fiction and evokes the powerful voices of an emerging Iranian-American voice.

—Persis Karim, Director of Iranian Studies, *San Jose State University*

A testament to the transcendent power of fiction, *The Moon Daughter* takes its readers on a journey through, across and between two strikingly distinct, yet decidedly connected worlds. Zohreh Ghahremani manages to enlighten, engage and entertain her readers in a way all authors aspire to and few ever achieve.

—Melody Moezzi, author of *Haldol and Hyacinth*

In *The Moon Daughter*, Zohreh Ghahremani takes us again to her native Iran where we discover that no matter the country or the culture, heart-break and joy, loyalty and betrayal, love and simple kindness are common denominators in human relationships. Both new and returning readers of Ghahremani's work are promised another novel that combines lyrical prose, exotic setting, and a compelling story.

—Judy Reeves, author of *A Writer's Book Of Days*

SHAREEK-E GHAM (PERSIAN, 2000)

SKY OF RED POPPIES, 2010

Zohreh Ghahremani

The Moon Daughter

a novel



TURQUOISE BOOKS

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Acknowledgement

IF “IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD ,” it took an entire city to help me raise my first. A book indeed a writer’s child and I am beyond grateful for the support I have received across the city of San Diego and through the One Book, One San Diego program. The number of people who helped me along the way makes it harder to narrow down the list of those who should be acknowledged and I will be a dreamer to think I can name them all. Please accept my heartfelt apology for any names I fail to list here.

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My dream editor Kyra Ryan believes in me enough to never give up. If my English is any better, she is the reason. A master of her craft, she is also a powerful writer who inspires me to give my stories the life they deserve.

Deep gratitude goes to my good friends Barbara Sack and Katherine Porter and to my darling Lilly & Susie for taking the time to read the entire manuscript and offer their fine editorial comments. And if you like the cover design, it is owed to my Susie’s artistic touch and the way she brought out the best in my simple painting.

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The support of my Iranian-American community has been my column of strength. As long as I have that, nothing can stop me.

Above all, I will forever be indebted to you, my loyal readers, who not only read, share, and support my work, but invite me to your lives and ask me to keep writing. I hope my heartfelt words will once again settle in your hearts.

Dedication

To the loving memory of my mother Sarvar Khazai, who remained a lady to the very end. Thank you
Maman, for your gift of life.

Rana

One

THE FIRST TIME RANA HELD HER NEWBORN, she did exactly what she had done with her other two children—she reached for the tiny fist and gently peeled back the fingers and counted them. Finding all ten, she took a deep breath and exhaled. Despite the faint smell of kerosene from the corner heater, the bedroom felt cold. Rana decided she'd count the toes later when the baby's feet were exposed.

Like most Iranian women in the 1970's, Rana had planned to deliver her baby in a hospital and with her doctor present. But the first contractions had come late at night while her husband was out. No taxis ran at such a late hour, but after the unforeseen snow had covered the streets of Shiraz, getting around town would have been difficult in any vehicle. Dayeh, the old nanny, had known a midwife who lived nearby and Rana was grateful they had found anyone at all.

The middle-aged midwife acted frantic, as though she blamed her patient for the way things had turned out. Her plastic gloves felt cold on Rana's skin. "Such a head on a baby," the woman said, "I'm alone coming out of a woman with *your* small frame." She wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her uniform. Her plastic gloves glistened with some form of fluid, though it was hard to tell what it was. "Mrs. Moradi, I'm afraid your tear is too irregular to stitch." And she hurried about, muttering more indistinct words in her frustrated tone.

Rana closed her eyes and tried to mask her anxiety. After a moment of absolute silence, she felt a rolled towel being pushed between her thighs.

"Hold that tight," the midwife commanded. She took Rana's hand and placed it on her abdomen over the area of the worst cramps. "Press hard here. That should help to stop the bleeding." She pulled the bedcovers up to Rana's chin and tucked them tight around her.

Rana heard water splashing, followed by the infant's cry, now softer than the previous loud wail. Before she had a chance to take a look, the cries turned to a soft murmur and then faded into the next room. She smelled burning wild rue and knew it to be her old nanny's way of wishing good health for mother and child. The smoke mixed with the odor of fresh blood and iodine vapors, turning the air too heavy to breathe. Following hours of labor, Rana felt woozy, and the pain that shot through her made it hard to focus on the midwife's instructions. She heard muffled voices in the hallway and felt the draft as someone opened the door, then came Dayeh's cheerful voice.

"Congratulations, Major Moradi. You have another little lady."

Rana perked her ears, unable to predict her husband's reaction to the news of a third daughter. There was a long pause.

"How surprising!" His sarcastic response sounded like a grunt.

Dayeh chuckled as if it had been a joke. "God's gift, and what a beauty at that."

Another silence.

"*Farhad*," Rana tried his name, but her dry lips were stuck together and her voice wouldn't come out. What was there to say to him any way? She held the bedcovers in clenched fists, listened and hoped, but soon heard the hammer of his heavy boots fading down the marble hallway. Somewhere in the distance a door slammed. Nearby, women whispered.

Rana wondered if the energy that drained from her and the emptiness it left behind could be what

it felt like when the soul left a body. As her mind filled with images of her other two children, her grip loosened, allowing her hand to slip away. Weightless, she felt herself being pulled into shadows and sank deeper and deeper into a dark well.



The warmth that caressed her face carried the promise of a bright sun. Circles of light moved inside Rana's eyelids like fireflies. She kept her eyes closed but tried to move her body to a sitting position.

"Oh, *khanoom* is up!" Young Banu had more ring to her voice than Rana's headache could tolerate.

"Please close the drapes," Rana pleaded.

The hooks jingled as they slid on the metal pole.

Rana opened her eyes and squinted at the remaining light. "Where's my baby?" she asked, conscious of the silence around her, wondering who had fed the infant.

"She's with Dayeh, ma'am."

Rana checked the clock on her nightstand. "Noon, already? I can't believe I slept this late."

A wide-eyed Banu shook her head. "Oh, you slept for two days, ma'am. The doctor came and we were here several times. You were burning with fever."

Rana shook her head. "Two days?"

Banu nodded frantically. "I'll get you something to eat. You'll need your nourishment."

Nourishment. What kind of milk had they given her newborn? Banu was gone before she had a chance to ask questions. And where were the girls? Marjan, now in third grade, could be at school, but little Vida should have returned from her half-day nursery school.

Banu returned, pushing the door with an elbow and carrying a large tray.

"How is the baby?" Rana asked.

"Oh, beautiful as the moon she is," Banu said while setting the tray on the nightstand. "Such thick eyelashes on a baby! *MashAllah*, I must burn more incense for her."

Rana touched her deflated tummy and felt as if all the weight missing from her middle had gone to her sore breasts.

"Is the Major home?" Rana hoped her anxiety wouldn't show.

"No, ma'am," Banu said, straightening the bedcovers to secure the tray. "He called last night. I heard Dayeh tell him you were resting."

So he had stayed out all night. Rana would not allow herself to admit where her husband had been. Or with whom.

She surveyed the food: Hot bread, soft-boiled eggs, and a bowl of *kachi*—the saffron pudding her old nanny thought essential for a new mother's strength. Rana took a spoonful, but the smell of rosewater made her feel sick again. She swallowed with difficulty and pushed the tray away. "Take this, dear, and just bring me some water."

Moments later, Dayeh strolled in without bothering to knock. She carried the baby wrapped in a blanket and presented her with pride, as if she herself had a part in her creation. She chanted in her shaky old voice, "I have a daughter, *shah*—the king—doesn't have, she has a face *mah*—the moon—doesn't have!"

With new found energy, Rana stretched out both arms to receive the infant and placed her own cheek on the warmth of the tiny head. When the initial thrill had passed, she placed the baby on the

bed and studied her features, now less swollen and more defined. It was time to absorb the details and familiarize herself with her newest daughter: soft cheeks, flared nostrils, and that tiny button on the upper lip. She leaned closer and inhaled. Oh, how she had missed that milky scent, how she adored her helpless little ones, that soft fuzz of hair, the wrinkled neck. She kissed the top of the baby's head and noticed Dayeh had decorated the baby's gown with all sorts of trinkets: A silver prayer charm in the shape of the holy Koran, a blue glass eye, the word Allah engraved in a silver hand, all joined together with a safety pin and secured on the band that held the baby's swaddling clothes together. When it came to keeping the evil eye away, Dayeh took no chances.

The old nanny beamed a smile and said, "Praise be to Allah, your fever seems to have broken." She touched Rana's forehead who was staring at the infant. "Pretty little thing, isn't she?" the nanny said and squinted. "I think she resembles you. Sure looks nothing like *them*."

Rana smiled. The woman made no secret of her hostilities toward Farhad and his entire family, and the only reason Rana tolerated such insults was that Dayeh had practically been a mother to her since she was a little girl.

"I just hope she has a happy life written on her forehead," Rana said with a deep sigh.

"Oh, dear child, happiness is a garden, but one has to plant the seed and endure the cold winter."

Rana thought about that, but did not respond.

"You have a name?" the nanny asked.

Rana shook her head.

"Well, you better come up with something, or she'll grow to be an old woman called Baby." She cackled at her own joke.

"I'll leave that choice to her father."

Dayeh turned her back. "As if *he* cares."

"*Dayeh!* Of course he cares. He just needs time to adjust."

The old nanny busied herself with the curtains, folding the pleats one by one and tied the strings with a silk cord. "Sounds like you've forgiven him already."

Rana lay back and closed her eyes. *Forgive?* Her old nanny's words couldn't be further from the truth. Which of his treacheries should she forgive? Women absolved their men for infidelity all the time, but how big would her heart need to be before she could forgive Farhad for practically moving out with his mistress? She felt a fire within, flames that no amount of sighs or tears could smother. She wasn't ready to discuss this openly, not even with Dayeh. After all, the nanny was an employee, and Farhad was Rana's husband the head of this family. Besides, she didn't wish to add more to a subject that had already become the talk around town.

The baby cried and Dayeh rushed over, picked her up, and started to pace. "I don't know what goes on inside that pretty head of yours, child, but I don't like the way you put up with your husband's absences."

Rana swallowed hard and wished she could go back to a deep sleep, one that she would not awaken from for days. She could not recall being so weak with her other two, or ever, for that matter. Conscious of the silence around her, she asked, "Where are the girls?"

Dayeh continued to pace while rocking the baby. "At their aunt's. The Major sent them over to her sister's and said they're to stay there for a few days."

Rana wondered how the girls coped with Badri's house full of boys and hoped the cousins were getting along.

The baby continued to fuss.

“I think she needs a change,” Dayeh said, sniffing around the baby.

“Let me do it,” Rana said with enthusiasm.

Her nanny stopped pacing and her worried eyes stared at her. “Don’t you move, child. That fever nearly had you killed and I don’t think you’re strong enough. It’ll only take me—”

“Please?”

Dayeh studied her with concern, then nodded and returned the baby reluctantly. “Watch her while I get clean diapers.”

Rana put the baby on the bed and smiled at the swaddling clothes Dayeh had designed. Multiple layers of cloth were secured around the baby with a yard of embroidered band, making her look like a mummy. Rana loosened the band and one by one unraveled the damp layers. The folds of fabric had left pink lines on the baby’s skin. “No wonder you were so unhappy,” Rana said, caressing her soft skin.

The baby cooed, her tiny legs kicking the air.

Rana stared at the little girl’s nudity. “Ah, what would it have taken God to put a little appendage between your legs and end my problem?”

Just then, Dayeh returned and took over. She removed the wet diapers and spread new layers of clean cloth under the baby. After wiping her, she dusted the baby with so much talcum powder it made her cough. Rana held the tiny feet and lifted the infant’s legs so the tiny backside could also be powdered. She stretched them again, then let go with a start as though she’d been electrocuted.

“Oh, my...” she whispered in horror.

“Let me do this,” Dayeh said, sounding resigned.

Unable to respond, Rana held the tiny legs again and pulled them straight down, side-by-side while staring at the baby’s right leg. Noticeably shorter, the tiny toes barely reached the left ankle. Rana pulled back and covered her mouth with both hands, unable to breathe, and feeling her own nanny’s arm around her, she buried her face into her shoulder.

“The midwife gave her to me so quickly, I’m sure she didn’t notice,” Dayeh said, as if this small fact would change everything. When Rana didn’t utter a word, she added, “I haven’t told a soul.” She put a hand under Rana’s chin, turned her face up, and staring into her eyes cautioned, “And neither should you.”

Rana turned her face. “Oh, my God,” she whispered.

She felt Dayeh’s hand rub her neck and shoulder the way it had many times before, her voice pouring out her blind devotion. “God will help to even them out as she grows.”

Rana pushed Dayeh’s hand away. “Oh, will He?” The tears that had gathered for some time now found her cheeks. “Did you stop to think just who created her this way?” Her voice broke amid sobs. “Is this my punishment or is it some kind of sick test?” She looked at the ceiling as if God would be somewhere on the roof, eavesdropping. “It wasn’t bad enough to give me another girl, this one had to be crippled, too?”

“Please, child, stop your blasphemy!”

“Oh, I see. He is getting back at me for ... that night ...?” Unable to express her frustration she screamed, “What? He gives my poor child a life of misery just to prove that life and death aren’t up to anyone but Him?” She threw her hands in the air. “So you think He won’t turn his back on me?” She pointed to the baby, “Hasn’t He already?”

Dayeh whispered prayers of forgiveness, wrapped the diapers loosely around the baby and lifted her.

“God is all forgiving, child. He’d never punish in this way. You were just upset that night, my child. You didn’t know what you were doing.”

Before Dayeh turned to leave, Rana reached over and pulled the prayer seal off the baby’s clothes. “You won’t be needing *that*, my love,” she cried out. “God wasn’t there when you were conceived, He obviously wasn’t there when you took form, and He sure as hell won’t be around to help you with this leg.”

The baby started to cry again, and Dayeh rushed out cradling the baby without bothering to close the door.

For a long while Rana clutched the prayer seal in her fist, thought of her bleak future, and wept. Not only had she failed to give her husband an heir to carry his name, now with a less than perfect child, she had given him ample reason to reject her. No one would blame him. She pictured her sister-in-law parading with her sons at family gatherings. But this was no longer a question of gender. Soon the news of her baby’s deformity would spread. She pictured the curiosity in the eyes of visitors, the criticism, and the pity. Her heart broke as she recalled the tiny deformed limb, and she had no idea how it would affect the life of her helpless little one. But she stopped there. Unable to send her imagination beyond the misery, she became conscious of her own lack of knowledge. What if the growth of the baby’s leg was stumped permanently? How would this affect a growing child’s functions? Would she walk? Would the condition worsen in the years to come? In some strange way Rana identified with that incomplete leg, as though this was her legacy, a way to make sure the baby would inherit some of her mother’s insufficiency. Her heart went to this newborn in a way that she had not experienced with her other two.

Dayeh’s sad lullaby echoed in the hallway. Rana watched her nanny’s shadow on the wall outside her door as it rocked the baby back and forth, back and forth.



With darkness all around her, Rana wasn’t sure if it had been the sound of a car that woke her. She was covered in sweat. Extending her arm, she touched the empty space beside her before the door squeaked open.

“Farhad?” her sleepy voice called his name, but in the light that spilled in from the hallway, she recognized Dayeh’s plump outline.

“It’s me, child.” She came closer and touched Rana’s forehead. “No fever. Thank God. It’s feeding time and the doctor suggested you should try breastfeeding. I’ll go wake the baby.”

“No, Dayeh, let her rest. Just bring her to me when she’s awake.” Before Dayeh had left she added, “Did I hear the Major’s car?”

The old nanny hesitated for a few seconds. “You did. It’s turned out to be a cold night and he came for his overcoat.” She paused before adding, “But he’s gone again.”

Grateful for the darkness, Rana kept her poise and acted as if she had no idea where her husband might be going. Somewhere, a woman with no face awaited him. Rana would have to deal with that some point, but not tonight, not while she lacked the energy to plan a future.

“I’ll be back soon, then,” Dayeh said and closed the door.

The words she had once heard from her sister-in-law now came back. “A true lady learns to adjust.” Unsure of how much more adjusting she could handle, Rana sat up and leaned against the head-board. Just then, she heard the car again, now from farther away. She left her bed, and went to the window without turning on the light. Tiny crystals frosted the windowpane. A pale moon painted the snow blue, giving the trees oversized shadows. Moments later the taillights of the army Jeep

spilled red over the driveway. Rana felt a chill as the car disappeared behind the gate, and the world around her turned colder.

She knew then the name she would give her daughter—the name of the darkest, coldest, and longest night.

Yalda.

Two

WHEN RANA HEARD THE CAR DOOR, she wasn't sure how to face her husband, but then came the giggles and the sound of her daughters chirping below the window. He was not alone. She looked out and found her sister-in-law's blue Mercedes in the driveway right behind the army Jeep, and the girls were now racing toward the steps.

Major Moradi greeted his wife with a formal nod and a "Glad to see you on your feet."

Rana did not respond as her attention went to her daughters, but she saw him from the corner of her eye as he helped Badri out of her fur coat before approaching the small table holding his pile of mail.

Marjan and Vida rushed to fill their mother's open arms, but no sooner had Dayeh walked in with the baby than they tore away and seemed to forget all else. "Ooo! How tiny." Marjan screamed with joy and they both hovered over the infant.

Badri pushed a bunch of white chrysanthemums into Rana's hand as if to avoid a hug. "I didn't have a chance to visit sooner," she said and rolled her eyes. "My oh my, girls demand attention!" Her smile showed no joy.

Dayeh walked across the hallway and offered the infant to Major Moradi, but Rana noticed he only glanced at the newborn and gently stroked her little head before returning to his letters.

Rana returned to the sofa and lowered herself into the make-shift bed. "I don't know how to thank you, dear," she said to Badri, and hoped it sounded sincere enough. With her own family in Tehran, she wanted her daughters to enjoy an extended family, she'd need to stay on good terms with her sister-in-law. She called the maid peeking through the open doorway. "Banu *jan*, be a dear and put these in a nice vase for me." She handed her the cellophane-wrapped bunch that reminded her of funerals.

After Banu had left, Badri raised an eyebrow and said, "I love how you talk to your maids." Her tone disagreed. "Then again, given that you spend so much time with them, I suppose they become your friends." She faced her brother. "Farhad, it must be refreshing to leave all those army boys behind and come to such a calm, *feminine*, household."

Rana winced, but once again she swallowed her words. Major Moradi looked at his sister from over the newspaper he had started to read but didn't comment. The silent agreement between the brother and sister wasn't new to Rana, but now she sensed more, a message, as though they had discussed the matter behind her back and now insinuated that she hadn't tried hard enough to have a boy.

"Thank you for taking care of the children," Rana said with common courtesy. "I would have wanted them back earlier, but the infection had spread, and no matter what the doctor prescribed, my fever wouldn't break. Dayeh didn't think I could handle the noise."

"Oh, they sure are loud, but they needed their mom." Badri said and as she waved a hand in the air, her sleeve slipped back to reveal a new emerald bracelet. "I suppose some women need to take it easy, which makes me grateful for being the strong type." Skipping the topic of Rana's infection, she sniffed loudly as if to pull half the air in the room. "I remember accompanying my husband to soci-

functions just days after each boy was born.”

Rana turned back to her daughters, who seemed mesmerized by what must have looked to them like a living doll. Marjan wanted to pick up the baby while Vida stood back and watched, her face already taking on the unsure expression of the middle child. “Come here, you two,” Rana called out to them. “I haven’t hugged you nearly enough.” But the girls didn’t seem to hear her as they followed Dayeh and the baby out the door.

“How long before dinner’s served?” Major Moradi said from behind his newspaper.

“I have no idea,” Rana responded. She thought how calm he was and wanted to confront him. But each time she thought of doing so, fear of what he might say stopped her.

He walked to the coffee table, slammed part of the paper on top of it and exchanged another glance with his sister before picking up a different section to read.

How much did Badri know about the other woman?

Rana pulled the blanket over her shoulders and looked out into the yard. The sun had melted most of last night’s snow, and here and there, she noticed the pale green of an early spring. “We need to register her,” she said, without turning her face to him and thought of the name that had come to her the night before. “Do you have a name in mind?”

Moradi shrugged without taking his eyes off the page. “Whatever you want.”

Rana stole a look at Badri, but she seemed busy examining her nails. Minutes later, the brother and sister started talking about the news around town, and the subject of baby’s name was left behind.

After dinner, when the girls were sent to bed, Badri prepared to leave.

“Let me get my hat,” Moradi said and walked to the hallway closet. “I was supposed to be somewhere earlier on, but you visit so rarely that I didn’t want to miss it.”

Badri kissed the air on each side of Rana’s face. Farhad put on his army hat and opened the door for his sister. Before following Badri into the hallway, he turned his face in the general direction of the family room and said, “Don’t wait up.”



The following week when Rana called Tehran to speak to her parents, Dr. and Mrs. Ameli. Her mother chatted as usual, but it didn’t take her father long to sense trouble.

“Are you feeling all right?” he asked immediately.

“Yes, Papa. I’m fine.”

“Something is wrong.” Now it sounded more of a statement than a question.

Rana hesitated. She had never brought her problems to him before, but this was different and she reminded herself that he was a doctor. “I can’t talk about it on the phone. Do you think you could come to Shiraz? Just for a few days?”

During the seven years since her marriage to a man from Shiraz, her parents had visited on two occasions. All other reunions took place in Tehran, and considering that Moradi’s presence in the capital was a frequent job requirement, the trips worked out for everyone. But with both girls now attending school, it was harder to travel.

There was a long pause. “Of course we will.” Her father’s voice reflected deep concern. “I’ll call you back when I’ve reserved our flights.”

Mrs. Ameli grabbed the phone from her husband. “May death strike me, what happened? Who died?”

Rana smiled sadly at her mother’s dramatic reaction. “Nobody died, Mother. I’ve been missing

you and it will make me so happy to see you again.”

“You don’t have an infection, do you? I knew you should have had the baby in a hospital, these days a delivery at home ...”

Rana wondered how her mother would have reacted to the high fever that nearly took her life. “I’m fine, Maman. This has nothing to do with my health.”

“Oh, God, don’t tell me it’s your husband. He’s not quitting his job, is he?”

Rana knew her mother was working her way into one of those scenes where she became the center of attention regardless of who faced the actual crisis. It would be best to tell her about the problem before the woman’s imagination had the best of her.

“No, Maman, it has nothing to do with Farhad, or me.”

The breathing on the other side of the line seemed to stop briefly.

“It’s the baby. Something’s wrong with her little leg.” She heard her mother gasp. “She’s otherwise quite healthy, but her legs just don’t seem to match. I—I think something happened while she was inside of me, but I want the last word to come from *Baba*.”

“Your father is an eye doctor, dear. What would *he* know about a baby’s leg?”

Rana recalled her visit to Dr. Fard and the deep concern in the old pediatrician’s eyes as he spoke about a possible need for corrective surgery. She wasn’t ready to accept that, much less ready to share it with her mother.

“A doctor is a doctor,” she said and tried a chuckle. “But please keep this to yourself.”

“What did Farhad say?” Not waiting for a response she added, “Oh, and that sister-in-law of yours. I’ll bet she had a few things to say.”

Rana bit her lip. “Please don’t worry, Maman. We’ll talk more once you’re here.”



They arrived on Friday, Major Moradi’s day off, perhaps to make it more convenient for their sister-in-law to meet the plane. Instead, Rana went to the airport, accompanied by two eager little girls.

“Farhad apologizes,” Rana said right away. “He’s away on business for the day.”

The drive home was noisy. Vida and Marjan clung to their grandfather and demanded answers to all the questions they had stored up for a year. Is that ice cream place open in winter? Have they added a new merry-go-round in Shahr-dari Park? When will the public swimming pools reopen?

In the excitement that followed grandparents’ arrival Yalda’s problem did not come up, but Rana felt its dark shadow lurking in every glance and in the pause between casual conversations. She noticed that as soon as the baby was presented to her parents, despite the adoring comments, they both stared at the swaddling clothes as if to see through them.

Soon Dayeh served an elaborate lunch. The aroma of saffron rice and seared lamb filled the dining room.

“You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble,” Mrs. Ameli said.

“Oh Maman, you know how Dayeh loves to fuss over you.”

“I do everything for you, over my eyes,” the old nanny said, using an old expression to show her willingness to be of service. “I can’t forget who my true masters are.” A nostalgic look fell over Dayeh’s face to show how she missed the Amelis and the time she had cared for Rana as a baby.

Dr. Ameli chuckled. “You better not let your current employer hear such things.”

Vida and Marjan took seats on either side of their grandfather. They made no secret about favoring

him over their bossy grandmother.

After lunch, they sat in the family room and Banu brought the tea. Dr. Ameli put Vida on his lap. “Now you tell Papa-joon what you’ve been up to since he last saw you.”

“We’ve had a baby,” she reported. Everyone laughed.

“You mean that little thing sleeping upstairs is yours?”

Marjan made a face to indicate she was too old for that game.

Vida nodded several times. “She came from Maman’s belly.”

“That’s amazing,” the old doctor said.

Marjan rolled her eyes. “He already knows that, silly.”

Mrs. Ameli laughed at the way her husband carried on.

Rana found it hard to share the laughter. The mention of ‘that little thing upstairs’ made her even more conscious of the main reason for this visit. She realized the urgency of a talk before her husband returned. Farhad still did not know about the baby’s leg. True that he hadn’t been around much, but he needed to be told. Maybe her father would agree to break the news to him. All morning the girls had been so excited that they stuck to grandpa, leaving no chance for a private moment to ask him for such a favor.

Dr. Ameli stood. “Some of us old people need a nap,” he said, but before leaving, he turned to Rana. “When the baby’s up, bring her to my room, won’t you?”

Rana smiled with gratitude. “I think she’s awake. I could do that right away.”

Moments later, with Yalda in her arms, she joined her father in the guest bedroom where he had spread a clean towel over his bed. “You can put her here,” he said.

Rana knelt down by the bed, put the baby on the towel, and started to undress her. Dr. Ameli sat at the edge of the bed and began his examination as if this were a routine check up. The touch of his cool fingers made the newborn cry. When he stretched the baby’s legs side-by-side, Rana thought the difference in their length already seemed more pronounced. She tried to read her father’s face, but the old doctor was absorbed in his work. He took time to listen to the baby’s heart and lungs, bent and flexed the joints of both feet, and checked the reflexes by gently tapping the knees. When finished, he asked Rana to put the infant’s clothes back on.

“She’s a healthy little thing,” he said with a reassuring smile. “Everything is just fine. As for the leg, I think it’s a random anomaly, nothing genetic, and we may never know what disturbed its development.” He adjusted his glasses and ran his fingers through his mound of gray hair. “You didn’t have any accidents, a fall, or anything like that. Did you?”

Rana’s mind filled with memories of that horrific night, but too afraid to confess to her father, she shook her head.

“What does the pediatrician think?”

“Dr. Fard mentioned something similar,” she said. “At this point, all I want to know is if it can be fixed, and how serious is the procedure.”

Her father stood up and wrapped one arm around her shoulders. “He is a far better judge than I am, but I wouldn’t let anyone touch her for years. You should look into surgical correction when she’s much older.” He looked into Rana’s eyes. “How is Farhad taking it?”

Rana didn’t reply.

“He does know, doesn’t he?”

She cast her eyes down.

“You mean you’ve kept it all to yourself this entire time?” His voice echoed deep horror. “Didn’t the pediatrician mention it to him?”

“Farhad hasn’t been around much,” she said and tried to sound calm. “He never spoke to Dard Fard.”

“It’s been ten whole days, my dear! What made you hide such a thing from your husband?”

Rana didn’t know how to respond. She wished she could be the little girl who used to bury her face in her father’s chest and cry.

“He is no different from the rest of people out there, Papa. Don’t look at yourself. Most people consider handicapped to be some kind of freak. I don’t need their pity and won’t wish for my baby to be an outcast from the start.”

“No one is crazy enough to do that to a baby,” he said, but his raised voice did not sound convincing.

“He hasn’t been the same lately.” Rana took in a deep breath before adding, “A third girl was bad enough news, any more and I was afraid he’d leave me.”

“Bad news?” Dr. Ameli exhaled his frustration. “How could you say that? I can’t even imagine what my life would have been without my four daughters.” He paused for a few seconds and lowered his voice to its normal tone. “I’ve never heard such nonsense. Men don’t leave their wives because there’s something wrong with a baby. Stop acting so guilty, it isn’t as if *you* caused this.”

Rana felt her heart sink.

He hesitated before asking, “Would you like *me* to tell him?”

She nodded several times, amazed at her father’s perception, at his aptitude for offering comfort when it was most needed. “I know it wasn’t a choice, but the truth remains that I have failed to give him the son he wanted so badly.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Ameli said and chuckled. “The last I checked my textbooks, it was the man’s chromosomes that made boys. Are you telling me Shiraz’s society disagrees with science?” He laughed again. Rana felt his arms tightening around her and realized this was the first time anyone had held her since the baby’s birth.



Major Moradi made sure he returned long after everyone had gone to bed. He went into the living room and did not need a light to find the bar located at the far end. A drink would relax him. He used to go out with his friends after a tiring assignment, but it had been a while since he’d done that.

The day the new baby was born, finding it hard to accept his shattered dream, he had walked aimlessly for a while before going to a bar. For months he had watched his wife grow bigger and imagined his little boy inside her. Maybe things would never be right between them, but she would now give him the male heir he had promised his late father. He had pictured the little guy so many times that by now his son had become a reality. So when Dayeh told him it was another girl, she might as well have given him the news of the boy’s death. He just had to get away from the house, go somewhere to be alone, and drown his silent tears in a drink.

Later, he called his best friend Nader and was told a few of the men were at his apartment. When he joined them and announced the news, he tried hard to mask his grief. At first, his colleagues poked fun at him and teased him about his growing “hen house,” but when he didn’t share their laughter the jokes stopped. That had been more than a week ago. By now, such gatherings were charged with unspoken words and heavy glances, as if the boys had talked about him behind his back.

On his return from Jahrom, he had stopped by a phone booth and made the call he had tried avoid for days. Parisa's lively voice filled his ears with a pleasure he had thought he would never feel again.

"Allo?"

He held the receiver closer to his ear as if to draw strength from it.

"Allo?"

He hung up and went back to his car. He needed to be with Parisa more than she could imagine but somehow found it wrong to be with her while dealing with a grief that she could not understand. He had gone to Jahrom instead and tried to come to terms with his disappointment away from everyone. Now, standing in the dark, he wished he could have bottled that cheerful voice saying '*allo*' so he could drink it and soothe his nerves. He took a deep breath and savored the calm, the darkness and the sound of whisky escaping the bottle's neck as it poured into his glass.

"Need company?" a man's voice startled him.

Farhad turned around and in the dim light coming from the hallway recognized the slim figure of his father-in-law in pajamas. "Hello, doctor," he said and his hand searched for the light switch on the wall. "Hope I didn't wake you." He turned on the light.

The old doctor smiled and turned his face away. "No, you didn't. And you can turn that thing off." He covered his eyes with the palm of one hand. "I was up, but by now everyone else must be dreaming of *seven kings*."

Farhad turned off the light and took another glass. "Soda?" he asked.

"No, water's fine."

In the column of light coming from the hallway, Dr. Ameli found his way to the couch.

Farhad carried the drinks and sat next to him. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here when you arrived," he said and meant it.

"Work is work," the old doctor said. "How was your trip to Jahrom?"

"The same as always. I spent most of my time at the base."

"Rana tells me you were in Tehran last week. Sorry we didn't get to see you."

"Yes. Again, I was mostly in the outskirts."

They sipped their drinks in silence for a few minutes.

"The girls are so grown up," the doctor said. "And, that baby. Oh, she's precious."

Another silence fell between them while the only audible sound came from a small humming refrigerator.

"Son," Dr. Ameli put a hand on Major Moradi's knee. "I hope you don't mind me calling you that. I've always thought of you as my son, especially since your father's passing."

Farhad nodded and for a second wished this nice man could have been just a friend, someone he could talk to. He stared ahead into the semi-dark space and said nothing.

"I know you're disappointed to get another girl," the old doctor said. "It's only natural to want what you don't have." He nodded several times, and as if to support his own opinion, added, "All my friends who had only boys used to wish for girls."

Farhad took a gulp of his drink and remained silent.

"Parenthood is such a privilege that gender should make no difference, but if you ask me, I believe girls are a lot more attentive."

"Is that so?"

Dr. Ameli didn't seem to notice his sarcasm because he added, "My mother used to say that a girl is her parents' walking cane for old age. When she said such things after Rana was born, I considered it her way of consoling me, but now I see there's a lot of truth in that."

Farhad's mind filled with thoughts he could not put into words. The image of the tiny army hat in his closet wouldn't leave him. He had ordered that funny thing just in case this time he'd be lucky. Only now he had planned to show off the baby around the base, covering the tiny head with that hat, pinning his single medal on the baby's clothes. In his mind's eye, the baby boy smiled and put his tiny fist to his temple in a salute. For months the vision had made him smile, but now it hurt so much that he could not push it away fast enough. He took another sip of whisky and blinked in fear of getting mist-eyed.

"I examined Yalda this afternoon," the old doctor said casually. "There seems to be a little problem."

Farhad looked at him. "Problem?"

"Oh, nothing serious," Dr. Ameli said and put his glass down. "At least, not at the moment."

Farhad waited for more.

"Rana doesn't think you're ready to hear this, but she may be underestimating your strength." He took in a deep breath and added, "There is a problem with the baby's legs."

Major Moradi shot the old man a sharp look, which he knew couldn't be missed, even in the dim light.

"There seems to be a difference in their length," Dr. Ameli went on. "Not a common problem, and not too serious. Nonetheless, it is a problem and will definitely need attention down the line."

Farhad got up. "That's great," he said and began to pace the floor. "That's just great," he said again before another long silence. No questions came, and no further explanation was offered. After a few minutes, he sat down again, now feeling numb, as if something had hit him in the head.

Dr. Ameli opened his mouth and looked as if he was going to offer more words of comfort, but Major Moradi raised a hand. "Doctor, I don't want to seem ungrateful and really appreciate that you care, but this is my problem and right now I need a moment alone." He went back to the bar to refresh his drink. When he returned, the old doctor was gone.



Dayeh went downstairs to ask the Amelis to go ahead and enjoy their breakfast without Rana. The baby had kept her up most of the night, and she might sleep late. Vida and Marjan were already done with theirs and rushed to check the baby. The Major accompanied his in-laws, but after the initial greetings, no one seemed willing to engage in a conversation. In the kitchen, Dayeh poured cardamom tea in tall glasses that had a gold rim and set them in ornate china saucers and let Banu take the tray in. She then served a fresh boiled egg to each guest before returning to the kitchen.

"Something's the matter in there," Banu said, nodding to the family room.

"You mind your own business."

Banu raised an eyebrow. "*Khanoom* said she wants to sleep, but the last I checked, she was up and if I'm not mistaken, she was crying."

Dayeh, now warming a bottle for the baby, stopped her work and shot the young maid a harsh look.

Banu looked away. "Can't blame me for caring."

"I know your kind of care. Caring enough to snoop around and blab. If anything is the matter with

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