



Rostam's Escape

By Amir Rezaizadeh

Chapter 1

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Majid bursts into the house. “Some *madar-jendeh* is ratting us out,” he says and collapses breathless beside Rostam on the couch.

Majid rarely swears, Rostam thinks. Something must be very wrong. If someone is betraying the movement just two weeks before the planned uprising then any and all of them will be caught, tortured, and executed.

“Which whore-mother is ratting us out?” Ali snaps from across the room. His stocky wrestler’s body atop his perch, a four-legged stool and the tallest seat in the room, looks to Rostam like a large boulder about to roll off a much smaller one. “Come on *madar-jendeh*, who’s the snitch?” Ali’s jaw tightens around his words.

Majid is out of breath and says nothing. Rostam knows that Ali will not let Majid rest until he responds. Majid’s shirt is wet and Rostam assumes that it is from sweat but hopes it were from rain. For weeks, Rostam has seen the promise of rain in the pregnant clouds over Tehran and watched the city pray for the clouds to let go of their burden, wash the city clean, and then leave so that the city can welcome *NowRooz*, the first day of spring and the new year, gleaming under the sun. But yesterday *NowRooz* came and went without rain or sun.

Rostam watches sweat pour down Majid’s face. It is an ageless face, a face etched out of scar tissue from an Iraqi shell when he was a thirteen year old volunteer for the *Baseej* force. Just a boy, drunk on promises of martyrdom, the heaven, and its virginal hooris.

Rostam knows that is the true story of Majid’s face but the other four in this house – Jaffar, Ali, Hossein and Koorosh – were told that Majid’s face was burnt in a childhood accident. Rostam thinks that, in a way, that story is also true.

“Come on, Majid. Speak!” Ali says.

“Let him catch his breath,” Hossein says.

“I’m not talking to you. Shut up.”

“Hey, take it easy,” Koorosh says.

“You, too,” Ali tells Koorosh and turns to Majid. “Majid, tell us what is happening.”

Majid doubles over and coughs. Rostam knows that Majid was gassed during the war and that as a result Majid cannot run or do any kind of an exercise. Ali, always impatient, continues to hound Majid while Koorosh and Hossein try to calm down Ali to no avail.

Rostam watches Ali, Koorosh, and Hossein fight over letting Majid alone as Jaffar, who started the movement, walks into the room carrying an antique silver tray and six matching hand-carved silver cup holders, each cradling a small glass cup filled with freshly brewed tea. Rostam watches Jaffar. He walks gingerly, deliberately, like a girl bringing tea to her marriage-suitors’ family. Now that’s what I call control, Rostam thinks. He knows of the news that Majid has brought, he’s heard the fighting and the tension in the room, but nevertheless he has taken the extra time to pour *six* cups of tea – even one for Majid. Nothing panics the man, Rostam thinks.

“Calm down Ali. Let the man catch his breath,” Jaffar says. Ali and Jaffar are best friends and Jaffar is the only one Ali listens to. Ali quiets down though he still fidgets on his perch.

Jaffar holds the tray before Ali. “Here, have some tea.” Ali takes one of the cups and two pieces of rock-sugar. Jaffar then sets down the tray on the coffee table in front of Rostam and Majid. Rostam takes a cup for himself and sets one in front of Majid.

Hossein and Koorosh in unison lean forward from their silk covered, replica Louis XV chairs, take their cups of tea and pieces of rock-sugar, and sit back. When Majid came in, the Twins were playing chess on a grand, hand-carved Indian sandalwood board set between them on

a century-old *khatam* table. Hossein is from Yazd, a city in the middle of the desert, and Koorosh from Lahijan, a thousand kilometers to the north of Yazd and in the middle of a rain forest. Hossein is fat and smooth faced with features of a Mongolian invader and Koorosh is dark skinned and thin. Even though they look nothing alike, when in private with Majid, Rostam calls them the Twins because they are always together and they always buttress each other's opinions. From the beginning, Majid told Rostam that the Twins were the heart of the group, its shapeless, shifting soul.

“Come on Jaffar, make him speak,” Ali says.

“Relax Ali.” Jaffar says as he moves to stand beside Ali and puts his hand on Ali's shoulder. “Please.”

Rostam glances at Ali who has fixed his eyes on Majid. Ali looks angry and agitated. Rostam senses that Ali needs to pounce on someone. In fear of becoming the target of Ali's anger, Rostam quickly looks away. Rostam knows that the only thing that's keeping Ali from attacking is Jaffar's hand on his shoulder.

“Jaffar, I can't sit here while Majid takes a nap. Come on, Majid, *khahar-jendeh*.”

Jaffar pats Ali's shoulder and says, “let me get him a towel.” Jaffar leaves the room and goes upstairs to Majid's bedroom.

This is Majid's house. It is bigger than Rostam's parents' house and in a better neighborhood, just steps away from Tehran University which all six boys attend. The house is old but decorated splendidly with silk rugs, antique furniture, and valuable European and Iranian paintings. The house belonged to one of Shah's favorite generals and when the general fled Iran after the revolution, the house was confiscated and sold along with all its furnishings to Majid's

father for a song as reward for his role in organizing and leading Kerman's bazaar against the Shah during the Islamic Revolution in 1978.

Only Rostam knows the true story of the house. To the other boys, Majid one day said, "it was my grandfather's" and Rostam just nodded.

There are other stories, some true, some not, some both. Sometimes it is hard to tell them apart and sometimes Rostam does not want to. Many of the stories are about Rostam and Majid in the army. Rostam likes those stories even though they are not true. He is brave in them, fearless, *a man*. Rostam believes Majid likes them because he does not need to explain the many things he is embarrassed about – his stupidity in becoming a *Baseeji* cannon fodder; his being thirty years old and only now starting university; his being from Kerman, one of the provinces, rather than Tehran; his being the son of a wealthy *bazaar* merchant who is a rabid supporter of the regime.

Jaffar walks back into the room with a towel and a sweater for Majid. He places them beside Majid on the armrest of the silk-covered couch and walks back over to Ali to stand beside him.

"Come on, Majid, you whore-sister," Ali says.

"Relax," Jaffar says putting his hand once again on Ali's shoulder. "Majid, whenever you're ready, tell us what you know."

"Come on, Jaffar." He jerks his shoulder and pushes Jaffar's hand away. "They'll come, round us up, execute us all while he just sits there. We're in the dark, we don't know anything. Which cell has been betrayed? How does it affect the other cells? Is it anyone we know? Is it one of us? Come on, Majid."

Majid is no longer out of breath but he still does not respond to Ali. He just leans forward and puts the towel Jaffar has brought him over his head. Rostam does not understand why Majid

is silent. Is this one of the many subtle acts which have made him the unannounced but acknowledged leader of the movement since he, along with Rostam, joined the movement a couple of months ago?

Ali gets off his stool and walks to the window. Rostam watches Ali study Majid's mulberry trees as if they will divulge what Majid does not tell. Ali's shirt stretches tight across the massive muscles of his back and Rostam knows that, unless Majid answers him, Ali will pounce on someone and it will be Rostam. Ali hates him because Rostam is Majid's best friend and Ali thinks Rostam is weak, a coward.

Ali's right, of course, Rostam thinks. He is a coward. He finds it ironic that his father named him after the great hero of the thousand year old epic, *Shahnameh* – Rostam, son of Zaal, the archetype of the bravest Iranian. His father had hoped that his son, born on the night that Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, would be Iran's new hero, its savior.

What a letdown for him.

Ali turns around and walks away from the window towards Rostam. Rostam looks away. He senses that Ali's going to come at him. Fear rises within him like a small rebellion gathering force in the tranquil countryside of his mind and preparing to attack. He hears his father's voice admonishing him.

Don't be afraid, be brave, be a man. You're my son and I am the son of a man who stood up to Reza-shah.

Ali reaches the other side of the coffee table and stares down at Rostam. He says, "Rostam, are you snitching on us, *madar-jendeh*?"

Rostam looks up at Ali. His heart races. The ceiling comes down on him, suffocating him like a giant heavy wool blanket. His body sinks into the couch just as his mind rises above it and the room darkens around him.

Breathe, Rostam tells himself but the cigarette smoke and the body odor in the room only suffocate him more and he searches for air, fresh air, outside air. He focuses on the old wooden window, its peeling white paint, its thousand-year-old floating cobwebs, and feels as if he's breathing in small bits of it.

It's like a dream.

Breathe.

Only if the window were open.

He could get up, walk past Ali, and open it, but, no, his knees will buckle and betray his cowardice to everyone. He knows it.

In his mind, he involuntarily begins repeating the muslims' profession of faith,

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah,

Ashhadu an Mohammed-un Rasool Allah.

Does he any longer believe those words? he asks himself.

I bear witness that there is no other god but the God

I bear witness that Mohammad is His Messenger

When Ali asks Rostam "You talked to anyone, *khahar-jendeh*?" Rostam feels as if Ali has put his knee on his chest and is crushing his rib cage. He prays for Majid to speak soon and rescue him. Why's Majid staying silent? Does he think that it is Rostam who's squealing?

You're on your own.

Rostam panics further. He looks at Ali and wonders what to say. He must do more than just deny being the rat. But what should he say?

It doesn't matter what you say, your voice will quaver and announce to everyone your fear and cowardice and that would be enough to convince others of your guilt.

Rostam hears Ali's voice but no longer his words. The only thing Rostam can think of is what the other five boys in the room would do to him if they settle on Rostam as the one betraying them.

They're your friends, he tells himself.

No, nobody here is your friend. Only Majid is and he also thinks you're squealing.

What would Father do?

"Rostam, *madar-jendeh*, answer," Ali shouts still standing in front of Rostam.

"Shut up, Ali. Sit down." Majid finally speaks and with that, Ali retreats to his perch on top of the stool and Rostam feels a measure of control over himself return.

Chapter 2

As Majid explains what he knows, Rostam stays seated still, afraid that if he moves he would betray to all the deep fear he feels. “My great uncle, he’s the eldest of our family, a *bazaari* merchant in Tehran, very respectable in the neighborhood. Yesterday, he had visitors all day, you know, the usual routine for *NowRooz* for the eldest and most respected – neighbors, family, the grocer, whatever. Anyway, the son of one of his neighbors is a *Pasdar* and during his visit, he told my uncle that the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* were planning to foil a student movement in two weeks, just after the *NowRooz* vacation. So, just now, when I went to pay my respect, he told me what he’d heard and told me to keep my head down until it all passes.”

Slowly Rostam lifts his body off the couch and sits on the edge of it. He lifts his right hand to reach for his tea. His hand trembles fiercely. For a moment he lets it hover over his thigh, makes a fist, keeps it clenched for a moment and then opens it to see if the trembling has stopped. But no. Afraid of spilling the tea, he uses both hands to take the small tea glass out of its 100 year old silver cradle and with both hands steadying the glass, he sinks back into the couch. He brings the glass cup to his nose and inhales the steam to clear his head. The aroma of the tea is soothing. He takes a sip. The tea is hot, bitter, and good.

Majid told Rostam that, when Ali approached Majid, Ali wanted to recruit Majid for one of the lower cells, but Majid was already part of a military officer group that was planning a *coup* to topple the regime and pave the way for democracy. Majid wanted to join the leadership cell of the student movement so he could coordinate the students’ plans with those of the officers.

Majid asked Rostam to join along with him and Rostam readily agreed. At that time, Majid and Rostam had known each other only a few months but Rostam trusted Majid implicitly and Rostam also felt that Majid trusted him. Majid and Rostam knew that Rostam would never be

allowed to join the leadership cell even if Majid was. Therefore, Majid suggested inventing stories about their past as cover for Rostam and they told Ali that Rostam was also a part of the military movement.

According to Majid, Ali told him that for security reasons Jaffar was reluctant to let two new people into the leadership cell of the student movement. Majid and Rostam met with Jaffar and Ali several times in Jaffar's cramped dormitory room before Majid convinced Jaffar that by allowing Majid and Rostam to coordinate with the officer movement, the student movement and their planned uprising would be much more powerful.

Before Majid and Rostam joined, despite Jaffar's meticulous preparations, the whole movement was about to peter out without accomplishing anything. Jaffar had the genius to organize but lacked the instinct to act; he could not take that last step. But Majid had the courage to take that last step and with him coordinating with the officer movement, the student movement got a new life and a new leader in Majid.

There was no struggle for leadership between Majid and Jaffar because Majid never directly challenged Jaffar. Instead, Majid focused on winning over the Twins. "Koorosh and Hossein are the core of the group. If we want action, we must win them over," Majid told Rostam over a bowl of icy, lemony *falloodeh*. Rostam was surprised. After all, the Twins never spoke when decisions were being discussed and never offered any opinions of their own. They only spoke once an issue had been fully discussed and dissected by others and it had become clear which way the group was leaning. Only then, did the Twins speak and then in unison and full support of whichever direction the group was leaning. That is why Rostam nicknamed them the Twins.

But Majid from the beginning saw the Twins as the sails of a ship driving it by following the wind. Rostam watched as Majid became the master of winning over the Twins and piloting the group even against the wind. Majid did it through the force of his personality, a personality so powerful that people were drawn to it like shipwrecked souls to a buoy, like moths to a flame.

“So, Majid, what do you think we should do?” Koorosh asks and everyone looks to Majid for an answer.

“I don’t know,” Majid says. He asks Jaffar, “What do you think?”

Jaffar’s long face is lightly bearded and as always haggard. He shrugs.

“Maybe your uncle was wrong,” Ali says.

Majid shakes his head and takes a sip of his tea. “No, he wasn’t. He’s old but he is sharp.”

“What did he say to you exactly?” Ali asks.

“I already told you. Let’s not waste time.”

“So may be his neighbor’s wrong, maybe it’s nothing.”

Jaffar moves away from Ali and leans on the kitchen door frame. “Not likely,” he says and lights a new cigarette, inhales deeply, tilts his head up, and blows rings into the air before continuing, “he knew that there was a student movement.”

“There’s always a student movement,” Ali says.

“There is no rumor of any other movement. We would’ve heard something, if someone else was planning something,” Jaffar says.

“How could they find out about ours?”

“Ali, it doesn’t matter. Either someone is squealing or just that walls have ears. Somehow they know about us.” Jaffar takes another deep drag off his cigarette and turns to Majid, “You have any doubts?”

“None,” Majid says.

“We have to protect the people we recruited.”

“You’re right,” Ali says.

“So we sit tight, don’t do anything, we still got two weeks to go,” Jaffar says.

Majid gets up and walks to the kitchen. Rostam watches him walk away. He is as short as Ali and as thin as Jaffar and tilts sharply to one side, as if one side of him grew while the other side stopped, but he carries himself with a self-assurance that always makes him the tallest man in the room. A beacon of manhood. A man among boys.

Rostam hears Majid open the refrigerator and pour himself a glass of ice cold water. He drinks from the glass as he walks back in. Majid sits back down beside Rostam. “Hossein, what do you think?”

“I think you and Jaffar are right.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

He leans his head back and studies the ceiling for a while. Everyone waits for him. He closes his eyes, rubs his face with both hands, and then sighs loudly.

“What are you thinking?” Jaffar asks Majid.

Majid keeps his head tilted back and both hands over his eyes. “I’m just wondering if we’re wasting the one chance we have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. Let me just think outloud for a second. Let’s say they know about us. They still haven’t moved against us. What if we preempt them, what if we move up the schedule from two weeks from now to two days from now, what if we strike before they can move against us, what if we catch them by surprise.”

“What about your army friends?”

“I think if they see the students on the news, they’d move in support.”

“Are you sure? We should coordinate with them.”

“I’d rather not, in case we’re being ratted out from their end.”

“We’ll risk everything,” Ali says. “If we’re wrong, many will die.”

“We die every day,” Majid says. “We all are dead already, aren’t we? They killed us long ago.”

“Yeah, but this is real death, Majid. Real pain and death, not some literary, metaphorical, artsy fartsy death, we’re talking real pain and death, the messy kind with blood and body parts and loud screams –”

“Ali,” Majid says, “Shut up! I’m not a stupid. Don’t patronize me, *khar-kosdeh*.” Majid is riled up. “You know what I’m saying.”

“No, I don’t. Illuminate me.”

Majid moves to the edge of the sofa and faces Ali directly and argues with Ali. Their voices rise. For a moment, Rostam wonders if one will jump out of his seat and hit the other. Finally Jaffar breaks in. “This is pointless. The real issue is that if we act now, can we succeed?”

“I don’t see why not,” Majid says.

“Majid, I don’t think it’s as simple as that,” Jaffar says.

“Why not? Why did we make all this preparation for?”

Rostam stops listening. It is pointless. It was a suicidal plan from the beginning anyway and if anyone thought otherwise, they were fools. Either way, they will die. And now, like always, they sit and talk and not act.

He's sat through many of these discussions. When he first joined the group, he participated in them, expressing his opinions forcefully and vociferously just as he thought a man would. But he no longer can rouse the passion to argue with Majid, Jaffar, or Ali – especially not with Ali. He no longer cares to compete with Ali in giving and taking personal jabs; he no longer cares to hold his own. What stops him, he wonders. Cowardice? Fear of being humiliated once more? Perhaps because he knows that no matter what he says, nobody will listen to him. How many times has Ali attacked Rostam when he's proposed an idea only to watch Ali support the same idea a few minutes later when Majid has suggested it? Maybe, they just assume he speaks out of fear. Maybe, they're right.

Rostam sips more of his tea and thinks of how he'd tell the story of this group. He'd change the room from one as opulently decorated as this one to a shabby one. No one would believe that Majid, a student, could afford such a house or could own such beautiful objects, even if his father was a wealthy merchant. He'd include all of the discussions, its ebbs and flows, because that's where the action is, in how men discuss and decide. He'd take himself out. Stories should be about men of action and he's only an observer in this room, a superfluous character. Majid would be the hero, guiding others to victory against an evil government.

But such an ending would be expected, wouldn't it? Perhaps, Rostam wonders, better that the hero guides all to their doom. Majid as a tragic hero. A theme he'd develop from beginning to end, from Majid's childhood as a pawn in the hand of his father and the Mullahs to his end leading his fellow students to their death.

“Rostam what do you think?” Majid breaks into Rostam's reverie.

Rostam looks at Majid and, even not knowing where the discussion among the others stands, he knows that Majid has asked Rostam's opinion so that Rostam can support him. Rostam

wants to support Majid, his friend, his only friend. Rostam wants to remain loyal to Majid and trust his judgment. But he disagrees with Majid. He is sure that acting now is a mistake. They'll be gathered and slaughtered like a flock of sheep on *eyd-e-ghorban*. "All warfare is based on deception," his father told him when he taught him Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* as part of Rostam's after school "Warrior Education." Surprise is their best weapon and they've lost it. Now, their only hope is the students in the cells not known by the *Pasdars*. Rostam puts down his tea.

"Surprise was always our best weapon. If we're compromised, we have lost that weapon." Rostam says. "My father has always taught me, 'in war, hope for the best, plan for the worst,' If we think we're compromised, then we plan for that and the worst case is that this cell is compromised. We should lay low, figure what's going on. Even if the six of us are arrested, at least the other cells will be saved."

Majid looks at Rostam and then turns to Jaffar. "If our cell is compromised, *Etella'at* will torture every single one of us here, till they know who's involved," Majid says. "There's no way to save the other cells."

Rostam is surprised that Majid refers to *Ete'llaat*, The Ministry of Information and National Security, also known as *VEVAK*, the successors to Shah's *SAVAK* and the ones who brutally and violently go after anyone they consider the enemy of the regime. Why would a warning from a *Pasdar* be connected to *Ete'allat*?

"You're assuming every single one of us will talk," Ali says.

"Every one of us will talk. Remember – 'real pain,'" Majid says.

"But even if one of us resists, some will be saved," Jaffar says.

"But we'll miss our chance. And anyway, we don't know which cell is exposed. The best defense here is offence, not hiding our heads in the sand."

“But if we –“ Rostam starts but Ali cuts him off.

“You whore-sister, you’re such a coward.”

“What’s your problem? I’m agreeing with you.”

“I don’t need you to agree with me,” Ali says. “You’re just afraid.”

“Maybe Rostam’s right,” Jaffar says.

“Or, is it better to move fast so that the other side’s taken by surprise?” Majid says.

Rostam wishes he had not spoken against Majid. It was pointless and now he has angered Majid. Perhaps Majid knows something that he does not. Perhaps Ali is right and he is just afraid.

Jaffar doesn’t respond to Majid. He walks towards the Twins and looks down at the game as it was left when Majid came in. He studies the pieces for a few moments. He mumbles, “I don’t know.” He studies the board a while longer and then walks back and stands in front of Ali, his back to Majid and Rostam. “You think we should start the uprising now?”

“Don’t listen to Rostam. He’s just scared, Jaffar,” Ali says. “I think Majid’s right.”

“Hossein, what do you think?” Majid asks Hossein.

“Now is as good a time as any,” Hossein answers.

Koorosh merely nods in agreement when Majid looks at him.

“Maybe you’re right,” Jaffar says, his back still to Majid and Rostam, “Maybe we should start now.”

“I think that’s the right move,” Ali says.

It is decided then. It is a mistake and they will all walk to their deaths. Rostam knows it. He is sure of it. Not a single doubt. But he will walk with them. That is what a man would do, should do. Here is his chance to be a man, like his grandfather, like his father, like Majid.

“Are you against starting the revolt?” Jaffar asks Rostam.

“I think he’s the rat,” Ali says. “I think somebody got to him, he got scared and talked.”

“Ali, shut up,” Majid says. “We’re all friends here.”

They all turn and look at Rostam, waiting for him to speak.

“Rostam, are you in or not?” Majid asks him.

Rostam looks at Jaffar and then at Majid’s disfigured face. Before befriending Majid, Rostam had been a fearful boy wanting to be a man. Majid was generous to him. He took Rostam to fashionable stores and showed him how to dress and act confident, trendy, and rich like the children of the wealthy families of Tehran’s North. He took Rostam to parties at Mansions in Tehran’s North where children of the wealthy, long-haired boys and miniskirted girls, away from *Pasdars’* and *Baseejis’* eyes, mingled, danced, and drank vodka, whiskey, and brandy. He tried to teach Rostam how to flirt with girls, charm them and bed them. He opened his house to Rostam, allowing him to spend many hours there, drinking, laughing, studying, and hiding from his father. He even brought Rostam along to join this group and after Rostam failed to recruit even a single person, Majid let Rostam claim some of Majid’s cells as his own. Majid always supported and defended Rostam in the group, and despite all of Rostam’s weaknesses and failings, Majid always treated him as a friend, an equal, a man. Now, Majid is asking him to trust him. Is it too much of a thing to ask, after all he’s given Rostam?

“So?” Majid asks.

Chapter 3

The phone rings. Everyone is startled and Rostam senses the fear in the room.

Majid calmly picks up the receiver and says, “*Allo?*” He listens for a moment before he begins to speak in the hyper-polite, formal *Farsi* reserved for strangers, elders, persons who command respect, and persons who do not deserve it. “How is your health? How is *Pari-khanoum*. We are humble servants before your greatness. Yes, he is here *Jenab-Sarhang*.” *Your Excellency, the colonel*. It is Rostam’s father. Everyone relaxes as Majid passes the receiver to Rostam.

“Rostam, does anybody speak Turkish there?” Rostam’s father asks him in Turkish.

“Why?” Rostam answers in *Farsi*.

“Just answer me,” Rostam’s father barks into the phone in Turkish.

“No,” Rostam says in Turkish. He looks at Majid and shrugs his shoulders.

“Listen to me,” his father continues in Turkish. “I’m in *Haj -Ahmad*’s store. Two *Pasdars* just came to the house looking for you, they wanted to talk to you. Why?”

Fear digs its talons into Rostam’s throat, choking him.

“Rostam, what’ve you done?”

“No, I ... no.”

“Rostam, you been caught drinking? Have you done anything with a girl?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Rostam says, feeling some certainty come back to his throat.

“Oh my god.” There is panic in his father’s voice. “Oh my god. You’ve done something political, haven’t you? Some stupid student thing. Oh my god. This will kill your mother.”

The receiver feels heavy and Rostam wants to hang up, to leave, to pretend his father does not exist. He’d wanted to tell his father that he was in this group, especially after they found out

about his mother's cancer, but the right time had never come. He'd been too afraid and now, it's too late and he looks the fool. No, he won't tell his father about what he and his friends have done in the past few months. His father will never understand. Rostam just won't go home. He'll stay in this house, hide with Majid, and see the uprising through.

He stays silent and does not answer his father, letting the silence hang between them like an ancient, dusty, heavy curtain.

"Listen," Rostam's father continues in Turkish, the panic now gone, his voice again solid steel. "Now, listen to me. You will leave where you are, go to *Maydan-e-Azadi*, to Ebrahamin-*khan's* garage. You will stay there until I arrive."

"Why? I don't know why those –"

"Do not say the word *Pasdar*. Say guardians."

"Fine. I don't know why those guardians came to the house. Maybe they were at the wrong house."

"They asked for you by name. You think I'm stupid. Now, Rostam, I'm telling you what to do and you will do it. You understand me?" His father pauses but Rostam says nothing and instead rests in the silence, waiting for it to breathe strength into him. "You will leave there now and go to Ebrahim-*khan's*. Understood?"

"*Pedar*," Rostam starts but his father cuts him off.

"You will listen to me now. Do you want to kill your mother? You and probably Majid and your other friends have done something, something very stupid. I don't what you've done, but all your lives are in jeopardy. I'm assuming none of you have thought about an escape plan for when things go wrong. Correct?" Rostam still does not respond. "I have experience with this kind of thing. I will figure out what to do. Understood?" In between the words, as his father takes quick

breathes, Rostam can hear the control his father is imposing on himself. “You will not argue with me and follow my orders. You will leave there now and you will not tell any one of your friends of what we’ve talked about. Understood?”

Rostam stays silent, his throat chalky and dry, unable to form words.

“Not even Majid. Understood?” His father waits but Rostam does not respond.

“This is going to kill your mother if I don’t take care of it. You understand that, don’t you? If anything happens to you, she will die. She won’t be able to take anymore in her condition.”

Rostam pictures the figure of his mother, riddled with cancer, doubled over, throwing up because of the chemotherapy, and his father rubbing her back. “Get moving. Now. Not a word to anyone. Not Majid, not anyone. Understood?” Rostam glances at Majid, then Ali.

“Yes, Father. I will leave immediately.” Rostam replaces the receiver.

“What’s going on?” Majid asks.

If *Pasdars* are coming to your house, then it’s this cell that’s betrayed. You know nobody in any of the other cells and no one else knows that you’re a part of the student movement.S

Someone in this room has betrayed them. But who?

You have to warn the others. But how? If you do it now, the rat will know that he’s found out. You have to get Majid alone and tell him. He will know what to do.

“I have to go,” Rostam says

“Your mother?” Majid asks.

“Yes,” Rostam says.

“Where’d you think you’re going?” Ali is angry.

Rostam ignores him. Still looking at Majid, he says, “I have to go now. *Pedar*, my father. I have to go home. Would you walk with me?”

Rostam gets up from the couch and steps over the coffee table without making contact with the table or anything on it. He is the only one that can do that and every time he does it, Majid says the same thing. “You’re a giant, a giraffe, a daddy long-legs. If NBA could recruit in Iran, you’d be a millionaire living in America.” But today, Majid says nothing.

“Sure, as soon as there is-” Ali starts but stops himself and instead swoops down from his perch on Rostam. “You’re the snitch. I know it.”

“*Kos-e-nannat*, you’re probably the snitch yourself.” Rostam is angry and wants to hit Ali but instead just steps around him to get his backpack.

“*Khahar-kos-deh*, I’m not done with you,” Ali shouts as he grabs Rostam by the shirt with both hands and turns him around and rams him hard into the wall. Rostam feels the impact of his head against the wall echo in his skull. It disorients him. “You’re the snitch, that’s why the *Pasdars* know about us, isn’t it? Now, they want more information and you’re going to them. I’m not letting you out of here alive.”

Rostam grabs Ali’s fists to pry them loose but can’t. At well over two meters, Rostam is almost one and half times Ali in stature but Ali easily compensates for the difference in sheer muscle strength. Rostam is still disoriented and can’t focus on Ali’s face. He shouts, “*madar-jendeh*, let go, let go.” He thinks he sounds high-pitched and powerless.

Majid wedges himself between Ali and Rostam. “Let go of him, Ali.” Majid shoves back Ali hard and without success. “He’s not an informer.” Majid shoves Ali again. “He’s not a fink, I’ve known him for years. Let him go, let him go, he has to go see his mother. You know she’s dying.”

Ali lets go of Rostam’s shirt, then hits him hard on the chest with both hands. “If you’re the rat, I swear on the *Quran*, I will find you and I will kill you.”

“Rostam’s not the informer, I’d stake my life on it,” Majid says. He is still holding Ali back. “Rostam get out of here. Go.”

Rostam catches his breath, looks at Jaffar and says, “we have to just lay low. Don’t start anything.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Jaffar says.

“Jaffar, he’s just going to betray us all,” Ali says.

“Shut up Ali,” Majid says, still holding him back. “Sit down.” For the first time, Rostam hears in Majid’s voice the jagged hardness of authority – same hardness he has often heard in his father’s voice.

Majid pushes Ali towards an empty arm chair and Ali sits. Majid then orders Rostam, “Get your stuff. I’m going with you.”

“Majid, you’d better know what you’re doing,” Ali says.

“I don’t need you to tell me what I’d better know and not know.”

“I’ll be back,” Rostam says. “Jaffar, don’t do anything. We’re found out. If we start anything, we’ll get a lot of people killed.”

“Rostam. Get out. Now,” Majid says.

Chapter 4

When Rostam opens the door to the yard in front of the house, it is dusk. The cool spring air rushes at him and he lets it fill his lungs. Rostam wishes it were cool, fresh, clean air but knows that Tehran's air is never fresh nor clean. From the mountains to the north of the city, Rostam has seen the dome of soot that covers the city. The soot floats up, hovers, and then slowly settles on everyone and everything in the city – on buildings, cars, and trees, in people's hair, skin, and crevices of their ears. Sometimes Rostam can even feel the soot in his lungs, moving into his blood, slowly poisoning his every cell. Only after rain, the air is a bit cleaner, fresher, and cooler and it hasn't rained for weeks.

Rostam climbs down the steps to the yard in front of the house. Majid's house and its surrounding land occupy most of a city block and should more aptly be called a *bagh* like the large walled gardens out in the country. Rostam likes being in Majid's *bagh*. It reminds him of a *bagh* he spent a summer at in *Karaj* just outside of Tehran. He was five years old and his father had come home from the war for good. The *bagh* had belonged to an old army friend of his father, Major Rangi, who let them stay at the *bagh* that summer. Rostam remembers spending the summer within the walls of that *bagh*, with only his father, mother and the groundskeeper, an old man whose wife had died and children left for Tehran years before. Rostam spent the summer riding his bicycle, napping with his father under the shade of mulberry and walnut trees, and following the old groundskeeper as he cared for the *bagh* he was born in.

Every day, Rostam watched the old man walk slowly through the *bagh* pruning young trees, felling dead ones, patching falling plaster in the large house in the center of the *bagh*, fixing its old tin roof, and filling the many potholes in the gravel road leading from the front gate to the

house, all for a man who was no longer in Iran. Later on, despite Rostam's father's best efforts to preserve the *bagh* for Major Rangi, the *bagh* was confiscated.

Rostam and Majid walk in silence away from the house and when Rostam judges they are far enough away from the house, he tells Majid, "Two *Pasdars* came to my house. That's why my father called."

"Do you know why?"

"I assume because we've been ratted on."

"That makes no sense." Majid voice is so quiet that at first Rostam cannot decipher his words.

"Why?"

Majid does not answer. Rostam waits a moment and repeats his question.

"Why your house? Why not mine or the others?" Majid says.

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's something else."

"Come on, Majid. What else? We have a snitch among us and he's in your house right now."

They reach the end of the *bagh*. At the gate, Majid puts a hand on Rostam's shoulder. Rostam turns to look at his friend. In the dusk, he can still see his friends' dark eyes, surrounded by the artificially smooth, almost plastic, skin.

"You have to leave Tehran," Majid says.

"That's what my father wants me to."

"As always, his judgment is right. Where to?"

"Tabriz, probably. I've got family there."

“You’re going home now?” Majid asks.

“No, to Meydan-e-Azadi.”

“And from Tabriz to Turkey, right?”

“Probably,” Rostam says.

They step through the gate and out to the street. A girl in a long, pale beige *manteaux*, extending from her neck down to her knees walks towards them. Her headscarf sits high on her head exposing more than half of her carefully coiffed hair and is loosely tied underneath her fragile chin. Her face is smooth, and even in the fast fading light, Rostam sees the heavy makeup. Rostam searches for her eyes and she returns his gaze. For a moment, he imagines what she must look like underneath her *manteaux*. It occurs to him that if he gets caught, he would die without ever seeing a woman standing naked before him and asking for him.

Rostam stops walking. Majid walks ahead a few steps before stopping and turning to face Rostam. It has gotten darker since they left the house. The street lamps are not on yet. “I will not leave Tehran. I’m going to stay and see this thing through,” Rostam says.

“Are you stupid?” Majid says. “You’ve got to get out of Tehran. If they catch you, they’ll kill you.”

“Same as you.”

“They’ve not come after anyone else but you. I don’t know why, but they’ve come after you. It makes no sense. Something’s wrong and even I don’t know what it is.” Majid hesitates and then grabs Rostam’s arm. “If you stay, not only you risk your own life, you’ll risk ours. Come on, let’s go.”

“We have a rat among us, Majid.”

“I know,” Majid says as he pulls Rostam along by his arm. “Who do you think it is?”

“I think it’s Ali. Why else would the *Pasdars* come after me?”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“You don’t seem to be worried.”

“When has worrying accomplished anything? What is to happen, will happen, if it’s God’s will.”

“When did you turn religious?”

“Since I got very scared this afternoon.” Majid laughs. Majid then pulls Rostam along down the street. “Come on, let’s go. You’ve got to leave.”

“Starting the uprising now is a bad idea. We’ll get massacred,” Rostam says.

“Don’t worry, we won’t.”

“If they are coming to my house, they must know what’s happening -”

“Well, so far it’s only you, nobody else. Come on.”

“Majid, we can’t risk all the other cells. If we’re found out, we can’t expose everyone.”

“I know, I know, I’ll make sure we’ll hide,” Majid says. They reach the end of Majid’s street and turn down the street that leads them to *Enghelab* Street. Such glorious names for city streets and landmarks— Revolution Street, Freedom Square, Independence Avenue – readymade symbols for any story about Iran, Rostam thinks.

“Who do you think is the snitch?” Rostam asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe Ali. Maybe the Twins. Maybe one of the cells.”

“Maybe I should stay. Maybe I should come back with you.”

“No, you have to go. Think of your mother.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“No, she won’t. You know better. And anyway, you’ll put the rest of us in danger. Remember, they came after you, not the rest of us. Maybe you talked to someone—“

“I didn’t.” Rostam is angry that even Majid does not trust him.

“Not like that, come on. Maybe a girl you were trying to impress, who told a friend, or whatever. Maybe it’s something else. Maybe Ali ratted you out and no one else. Maybe you insulted a local *Pasdar*. Maybe the *Pasdars* are coming after the wrong guy and you’re just unlucky. Whatever it is, you come back, you’ll put everyone in danger. Understand?”

When they reach *Enghelab* Street, they stop walking. The street is busy with cars, taxis, motorcycle, and buses. Tehran University is only a block away. Since high school, Rostam has spent countless hours browsing in the bookstores across from the University looking for books that had escaped the eyes and intelligence of the Ministry of Culture’s censors.

Majid lets go of Rostam’s arm and says, “don’t worry, everything will be fine. I have to get back before Ali does something stupid,” Majid says. The two friends shake hands, embrace, and kiss each other on the cheeks. Rostam is always amazed at how the scar tissue on Majid’s face feels like anyone else’s skin. Rostam feels the tears in his eyes overflow. He’s glad it’s dark and Majid cannot see him crying.

“*Khoda-hafez*,” Rostam says.

“And God be your protector also,” Majid says, turns around and walks away quickly..

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Rostam shouts after him.

Majid stops, hesitates for a moment, then turns around and walks back toward Rostam.

“Rostam, you’re my brother. Listen to me, I know you want to stay. Don’t. Things are a lot more complicated than they seem—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just listen to me. Trust me on this, there is a lot more going on, stuff I know that you don’t, things you can’t know,” Majid says.

The street lights suddenly turn on and startle Rostam and make him feel as if he is at an amusement park. When Rostam thinks back to this moment, he always recalls its unreality, its fictional quality, and wonders if he had imagined it. Rostam feels as if the plane trees gently descend upon them and provide them a still, quiet canopy that covers and shields them from the din of the cars, buses, motorcycles, and people. Rostam hears every word that Majid says. “You’re a good person. If you’re caught, you’ll be tortured, you’ll be executed, harm will come to your father, your mother will suffer. If you are arrested, I won’t be able to protect you any longer.” Rostam is confused by what Majid says. He does not understand what protection Majid is referring to and wants to protest that he needs no protection anyway. But before he can say anything, Majid grabs both of Rostam’s arms and looks into Rostam’s eyes. Rostam tries to decipher the depth of Majid’s black, black eyes. He pulls Rostam close to him and embraces again him tight against his chest. He then bends Rostam towards himself and kisses Rostam on both cheeks again. “Leave tonight, don’t look back and you’ll be fine. You understand? Don’t look back.”

Majid then quickly walks away, almost running, back to his house while reaching into his trousers for his cellular phone.

Chapter 5

Rostam jumps over the deep, open drain between the sidewalk and the street and stands at the edge of the sea of cars. He looks at the passing orange taxis searching for one that has space for one more person. As one of them slows down, he bends down and shouts into the open window “Straight to *Azadi*.” Straight to freedom. Rostam’s chest constricts at the thought of what he is saying.

The taxi stops. There are three passengers in the back and one in the front. The passenger in the front seat struggles to open the door but cannot. The driver leans across the passenger’s lap and pulls on the door handle and says something to the passenger and the passenger hits the door hard. The passenger gets out. He is a fat, sweaty man. Rostam gets in between him and the driver. When the passenger gets back in, his large body squeezes Rostam toward the driver. “I am sorry that you are not comfortable, I’m very fat and you are, *masha-allah, masha-allah*, very tall,” the passenger says.

Rostam is not comfortable but knows that it’s not the man’s fault and anyway it’d be impolite to say anything and, despite the man’s pleadings, he probably doesn’t really care. And even if he cared, Rostam wouldn’t and couldn’t know it because the man’s pleadings are just *tawrof*, anyway. You have to say these things to be polite and nobody ever knows if another person really means what they say or not. So Rostam engages in *tawrof* with the passenger and responds, “please, please, I’m very, very comfortable. Your concern for my comfort is from the extreme genteelness and generosity of your soul. I thank you very, very much.”

“Straight to *Azadi*?” the driver asks Rostam as he shifts the twenty year-old Iranian built *Peykan* into first gear.

“Yes,” Rostam says.

“We’re express now.,” he says, “Even our glorious new subway can’t say that.”

The taxi reeks of sweat and cigarette smoke. The small ashtray jutting out from the front panel is full of cigarette butts and the speedometer does not work. A green-hued transparent vinyl covers the dashboard and various pictures – pictures of Imam Ali, Imam Hossein, the Imam Hossein mosque in Karbala, and the Imam Reza mosque in Mashhad; pictures of tombs of Koorosh the Great at *Pasargad* and of poets Ferdowsi, Molana, Saadi, and Hafiz; pictures of the ruins of *Persepoli* and the monument at *Azadi Square* built by the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, to render immemorial the fictitious 2500 year unbroken thread of kings connecting him to Koorosh; and a picture of Imam Khomeini to whom Iranians gave credit for cutting that thread. The entire story of Iran and the struggle for the Iranian soul, a soul divided between the Iranian culture and the Shiite Islam, all summarized in a handful of pictures. Were the pictures chosen to tell that story or just as a cheap way to decorate a broken down taxi, Rostam wonders.

The driver grinds the gear into second and digs the gearshift handle into Rostam’s knees. “I’m sorry *ghorban*,” the driver says.

“You’ve gotta fix that clutch, *Haji*,” a passenger in the back says.

“*Ghorban*, don’t call me *Haji*. I’ve never been to Mecca and never will. Call me *ghorban*, call me *jenab*, dear friend, even *madar-jendeh* but don’t call me *Haji*. It was all this *Haji* business that got us all into this mess. Dirt over the heads of all *Hajis*,” the driver says.

“Don’t mix the *Hajis* and the *Hezbollahis*. These people are not Muslims, they’re animals,” a second passenger from the back says.

“How do you know they’re not Muslims? They say they are. Maybe they’re the real Muslims, not us.”

“True Islam is different,” the first passenger from the back says. “True Islam is about peace. If you read the Koran-”

“How can I read the Koran? I don’t read Arabic-”

“Read it in translation.”

“But the Mullahs tell me that the translations are wrong, that what I think it says in Farsi is not what it says in Arabic, they tell me they are representatives of God and Imam Mehdi on earth, they tell me that Koran is God’s word and should be read in Arabic.” The driver changes lanes quickly and misses another car by a millimeter and swears at him. “Why would God send me his word in a language I don’t understand?”

“Don’t say these things. It’s blasphemous.”

“Blasphemous. Huh!” He honks the taxi’s horn at a slow moving car and changes lanes again. “Let me tell you what is truly blasphemous? I fought in the war and lost half of my hand,” the driver says, holding up the thumb and forefinger which are all remain from his left hand. “You want to know what’s blasphemous? I was a *Pasdar* and I persuaded 15 year old brother, my mother’s only other son, to volunteer for the *Baseej* corps.

“We happened to be part of the same attack. We were all whipped into a frenzy by a man whose job was to fire us all up for martyrdom and joining Imam Hossein, may that man find his deserved, special place in hell for sending so many innocent children to their deaths.

“My brother volunteered to clear a mine field ahead of our attack. Do you know how they were told to clear the minefield? To walk through it. Groups of twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old boys shouting, *allah-o-akbar*, not a gun among them, walking into machine gun fire so that they set off mines for the follow on tank and infantry attack. I speak the truth *ghorban*.”

The driver changes gears and Rostam feels relief from the stick shift not digging into his knee any longer. “He was a fifteen year old boy, no training, nothing, just armed with a martyr’s *kafan*, the white long burial shroud wrapped around his body, a green head band, and a plastic key to heaven around his neck. I helped him with his *kafan*. I kissed him and hugged him and we cried as he told me he was excited that he would be in heaven in a few moments from then, with God, Imam Hossein, Imam Mehdi, and the *houris*. As I held him, he whispered to me that he felt scared though he knew he shouldn’t as God was with him. He also said that he felt he was a sinner because he looked forward more to being with the virginal *houris* more than anything else. I scolded him for his fear and his sinful thoughts. Scolding a scared kid going to his death, now that is blasphemy. Being jealous of a brother you are sending to his death is blasphemy.”

“Why were you jealous of him?”

“Because he’d be let in through the gates of heaven before me, because I had to wait because I was a *Pasdar*, had a gun, had to fight and could only hope to become a martyr like him.” For a moment Rostam thinks the driver is going to cry. But he the driver just changes lanes and continues, “Poor kid. What I did was blasphemous, not what I say about these animals. Half a million dead and for what? That the mullahs become richer than the Shah? That the mullahs send money and guns to others when we did not have enough ourselves? We all know that the war could have ended a year or two after Iraq attack, after we drove back Saddam’s army, if only that old man, Khomeini, had relented. With everyone against us, we knew we couldn’t win the war against Iraq but we kept on fighting because of an old man’s grudge against Saddam. Now, that’s blasphemous, *ghorban*, not what I say about *Quoran-e-Majid*. I speak the truth, *jenab*.”

“Dear friend, I apologize, I did not mean to offend,” the first passenger says.

But as the driver weaves through the traffic, he continues to speak as if he's not heard the passenger at all. "Last night, my flower of a daughter comes home crying, because two thugs – *baseejis, ansaris*, or whatever these thugs call themselves these days – stopped her in the street and called her a *jendeh* because she wore makeup and her scarf was loose." The driver slams on the breaks, looks to his left and right, and not finding space, waits for the car in the front to move again. "My flower of a daughter called a whore! What is a young girl to do? Calling a young girl a whore is blasphemous, not what I say. I speak the truth."

"You have suffered greatly, I truly beg your forgiveness," the first passenger says.

"If you are not offended, may I ask what you do, *jenab-agma*?"

"I'm a humble shoe-seller," the first passenger says.

"But you don't sound like you always were always a shoe-seller."

After a moment's hesitation, the first passenger answers, "I was a literature professor at Tehran University but I was fired after the revolution."

"Ahah!" the driver says. "I knew you were an educated man."

"You an educated man should know better," a second passenger in the back says.

"Your Excellency, I'm not an educated man like yourself. My father was a farmer from Arak and he came to Tehran to find a job. He was an illiterate man. He worked as a *hammal* in *Bazaar*, carrying carpets, sacks of pistachios and almonds, anything and everything heavy. He built us a one room house out of mud, cement, cinderblocks and empty cans of cooking oils in the shantytown *hallabi-abad*."

"There is no shame in being a *hammal*, caring for your family," the first passenger says.

"No, there is no shame," the driver says, "But being a *hammal* is no better than being a mule. I know it, because I also worked for a while as a *hammal* just like my father. It's a terrible

job. It breaks your back and your soul. So when the revolution started, I was only sixteen but I was the first to go out into the streets. For my own sake, for the sake of my brother and sisters, for my father's sake. When I told my father, I thought he'd be proud. But instead he became angry. He'd never laid a hand on any of us, but that night he beat me. Savagely.

“The next morning, just like every other morning, he woke me up for our morning *namaz*. But that morning, only me and no one else. We prayed together at dawn before anyone else in the family was awake. He then took me out of the house, sat me down on the dirt leaning against the ramshackle wall of our house, and sat beside me. He told me a story that his father had told him.

“He said a long time ago, in some village, after a great famine, news spread that a holy man, a *mojtahed*, a jurist of renown, had chosen their village to live in. The news spread that he was a descendant of one of the twelve Imams, a true *Imamzadeh*. People spoke excitedly that this man would bring water to all the wells and to the sky, that no child would ever be sick again, no woman would ever die giving birth, and no man ever would die of a fever. Rumors spread that crops would forever bear magnificent harvest and the village would become the envy of all the world.

“Each day the villagers grew more excited. The men built a house for the holy man – the largest and grandest house in the village. They built him a mosque so that he can lead them in prayer. They even build a shrine to bury him so that even in death he could watch over the village. For the day of his arrival, the women began to prepare a great feast and chose the most beautiful girl in the village to become his wife.

“Everyone in the village worked hard, young and old, men and women; everyone except for a single old man, the poorest man in the village, an old man who lived in a hovel with his donkey. The old man, the villagers had long said, went insane when his wife died giving birth to

their stillborn son. The old man did not help the villagers prepare for the holy man. He just kept doing what he did every day – he farmed his small lot with one old donkey and he fed himself and his donkey from what he could get from that lot. He paid no attention to all the hullabaloo in the village.

“So one day, the villagers took pity on him. The villagers asked the *kadkhoda* of the village to go see the old man. The *kadkhoda* found the old man outside his hovel filling his donkey’s feed bag. The *kadkhoda* asked the old man, ‘haven’t you heard the news? A holy man is coming, a jurist, an *Imamzadeh*, an *Imam*. Come and help us. Even you will benefit, old man.’

“The old man did not turn around to look at the *kadkhoda* but continued to fill the feed bag until it was full. He then turned, looked at the *kadkhoda*, and ran his hand along the donkey’s neck. He said, ‘tell me this one thing about this holy man. Does he have a mouth? Does he have teeth?’

“The *kadkhoda* was confused by the question and thought that the old man was in fact insane and that he had wasted his time coming over to help old man. But he answered the old man nevertheless. ‘Yes, of course, he has a mouth and teeth.’

“The old man lifted and put on the feed bag over his donkey’s head. ‘So,’ the old man said, ‘he is coming to eat.’”

“Your father was a wise man,” the first passenger says.

“Yes, he was a very wise man but I didn’t listen. I went to demonstrations and after the revolution, I became a *Pasdar*, a ‘guardian of the revolution,’ wanting a better life for my family and my children. I fought in the war and sent my only brother to his death. For what? I have a daughter and a son, both with university degrees, neither has a job, and, after what I’ve given to this country, these animals call my flower ‘*jendeh*.’”

As Rostam listens, the conversation morphs into the usual gripe against the regime and the mullahs. One of the passengers says that one day from every single one of the lampposts a mullah will hang by the neck. Rostam has heard and joined in these gripes many times in taxis, stores, bread lines, everywhere. He wants to participate so that the other men do not think him a snob or worse, a *Hezbollahi*, so that he feels like a man, but he doesn't. He feels worn out. He rubs his hands on his pants to wipe the sweat off.

Chapter 6

What did Majid mean by what he said just before they said goodbye? How has he been protecting Rostam? What did he mean by harm to his father and mother? Did his words mean any more than those of a concerned friend?

Rostam sinks into his own thoughts trying to piece together what has happened over the past few months. His thoughts wonder to the day Jaffar finally relented. They were all in Jaffar's room and it was hot and uncomfortable. Rostam was hung over and wanted to go home and sleep. Jaffar, who desired most of all to become a professor at Tehran University, stood in his tiny room in front of the closed curtains as if he were standing before an auditorium full of students and lectured the three of them on *his* student movement.

Jaffar recounted that originally he had not intended to start a movement. "It all started a about a year and a half ago, when I invited Ali, and then Koorosh and Hossein, to my room to read banned newspapers and books." Soon, he had them spray painting slogans around town, slogans such as "Down with the regime," "Freedom for All Political Prisoners," and "Death to the Dictator," the code for referring to the Supreme Leader of the country Ayatollah Khameneii. Within a few months, he began planning a student uprising.

"I drew on my doctoral studies of various revolutions, especially our own *Mashrooteh* Constitutional Revolution of last century and our recent Islamic Revolution," Jaffar lectured. "I reasoned that the students on their own could not force changes in the government. They could only act as a catalyst for Iranians' anger.

"We, Iranians, are Shiites. Shiites have always been the underdogs. Our most revered figure, Imam Hossein, despite facing certain defeat and death, raised the flag of defiance and rebellion against the powerful and corrupt Caliphate of Yazid. Seventy-two of his companions

followed but the rest fled. Since then, every year for a thousand years, we immolate ourselves to pay penance for our failure to follow him that day. So, I believe when a small group of students follow Imam Hossein's example and dare raise the flag of defiance against the mullahs' regime, Iranian people will be roused from their slumber." Rostam remembers the next sentence clearly because Jaffar paused, opened the curtain, and the sun poured in and made Rostam's headache worse. Jaffar raised his voice and with flourish said, "we will wrest away the symbolism of Imam Hossein from the Mullahs and give him back to the people. We will show the masses that *we* the students are Imam Hossein and the Mullahs, Yazid."

Jaffar continued on but Rostam stopped listening at some point and only remembers parts of what Jaffar said. Rostam mainly remembers feeling ill from the sunlight, heat, Jaffar's lecture, and his drunkenness the night before.

At some point Jaffar cleared his throat, paused, and said, "Our goal is to take over Tehran University and barricade ourselves inside the buildings. We will then make a series of political demands for sweeping changes. We will appeal to as large a cross-section of population as possible – the *bazaar*, dissident clerics, intelligentsia, farmers and factory workers, university educated youth and the armed forces, everyone. We will demand political freedoms – freedom of speech, release of political prisoners, an end to the tyranny of *Sepah-e-Pasdaran*, an end to torture, secret trials and executions of prisoners. We will demand an end to vetting candidates based on their religious views and require constitutional amendments putting in place a term limit for the Supreme Leader. We will demand his direct election by the people. We will demand equality of men and women under the civil and criminal laws. We will demand an end to corruption and graft in the government and require investigation of *bonyads* and the great wealth and power these so-called charitable institutions have amassed. We will demand ..."

Rostam realized that Jaffar's list of demands would never be met and that the student movement he had planned was a suicide mission. It was designed to make martyrs of the students so that they would be more like Imam Hossein. But Rostam did not care; he was happy to be there with Majid. The night before, Majid had helped him dress in brand new trendy clothes and taken him to a party at a large house in North of Tehran; he had drunk Martinis and had done his best to flirt with mini-skirted girls in the manner Majid had taught him and now, the day after, here he was, nauseous and sick from the party and about to join the *leadership* of an underground student movement. Three months before, Rostam would never have dreamed of doing such things. In three months, Majid had transformed him from a boy into a man.

“I devised a security structure to guard against the movement being found out and betrayed,” Jaffar said after he had finished with his list of demands and taken a sip of water. “I organized the movement into a number of self-contained cells and assigned each a task. Those tasks range from gathering supplies like food, water, clothing, medicine, electrical generators, and electronic equipment and smuggling them into the University, to developing and executing plans for taking over university buildings, barricading them, and defending them. We place each new recruit in a cell – just like we were going to do with you two. Each new recruit knows only the members of his cell and the person who recruited him. Each new recruit is allowed to recruit others for the cell but is not allowed to tell anyone outside the cell whom he recruits, not even the person who recruited him. No cell is told the entire plan but only the general outlines and the details that concern the cell. Therefore, no one person can betray the whole movement.”

Is that what Majid meant by protecting him? Does he think it is one of the cells that has been exposed? But nobody from the cells know him. Does he, like Rostam, think that Ali is the

one betraying them? Was Majid talking about protecting him from Ali? But that makes no sense, because it was the *Pasdars* that came to his house.

“You are a student, are you not?” the man beside Rostam asks and breaks Rostam’s reverie.

“Yes, I am,” Rostam answers.

“You are the hope of all of us,” the man says. “If anyone is going to start anything, it is the students.”

“Well, they already have, haven’t they? How many times?” says the third passenger in the backseat who has been silent so far. “How many times do you want them go into the streets and get killed? My neighbor’s son joined one of these student riots. The *Pasdars* picked him up in the street and for six months his parents did not know where he was. His mother cried day and night. His father went from ministry to ministry, hospital to hospital, prison to prison. Nothing. Not a single word about their son until one day, they got a call to come and pick him up from *Evin* Prison the next morning at six and to bring a lot of money. They were happy. The next morning, they arrived at *LunaPark* across from *Evin* at five. They waited. Other families came to to pickup their sons or daughters. Starting at 6, they began to hear gun shots every ten or fifteen minutes. The mothers became hysterical and the fathers paced nervously. They knew what was happening beyond the walls of *Evin*. At eight o’clock, the families were told that their sons and daughters were executed that morning after being convicted at Islamic Revolutionary Courts as apostates and the enemies of the revolution, the Supreme Leader, and the Islamic Republic. The parents were then asked to pay for the cost of the bullets used to execute their children if they wanted to be given possession of the bodies of their. At least like many, they were not buried in unmarked mass graves,

“At *Behesht-e-Zahra*, at first, a mullah wouldn’t let my neighbor bury their son along with ‘normal’ people in a named grave. The mullah said their son had to be buried separately and namelessly with other enemies of the Islamic Republic. The boy’s mother went berserk. The boy’s father begged and then bribed the mullah until he relented and their son was allowed to be buried among everyone else at *Behesht-e-Zahra*, but as far away as possible from the war martyrs and Imam Khomeini’s shrine.

“His father told me that when his son’s body was washed, that despite the fact that his body and face were disfigured by bullet holes and the final *coup de grace*, he saw that his son had been tortured, he saw that he was lashed, beaten, burned, and worse. His fingers were broken, Two of his fingernails were missing. His genitals were burnt. He was raped. What did they think he was going to tell them? America’s secret plans for Iran? That’s what happens to students when the students start something and the rest of us stay home.”

“*Ghorban*, people have family, children, they don’t want to risk everything while their neighbors sit at home.” the man beside Rostam says.

“Exactly. Then people should shut up and leave the students alone.”

The man beside Rostam fidgets. He does not respond to the man. Instead, he asks Rostam, “What do the students think?”

“The students are fed up with the regime, there have no freedom, no jobs, no future. But even if there is a change, who’s going to take the place of the Mullahs? Shah’s son?” Rostam says.

“We’ll have democracy.”

“No democracy,” the driver says, “People of Iran – we’re stupid. We need a strong man, not like the last Shah – he was weak – but like his father, Reza Shah, like *Atta-Turk*, someone who’ll make sure we don’t put another group like these ones in charge.”

“Reza Shah? You know how many people he killed? You know how much land and money he stole for himself and his family?” the man beside Rostam says.

“Yes, but at least he also improved the country, set women free, built factories, roads, hospitals, universities, railroads, brought a donkey-riding, backward nation into the modern age.”

Rostam loses interest. He doesn’t care about political and philosophical discussions. He stays silent for the rest of the ride.

He has a choice to make – stay or leave. What would a man decide? What should he decide to feel like a man? He wants to be a man, to feel like a man.

He has had the feeling before. First time was on his twelfth birthday, when after blowing the candles, his father put his arm around Rostam’s shoulders and said to him, “Rostam you are a man now.” What Rostam felt at that moment he has never been able to describe – he felt tall, brave, strong, honorable, responsible, but each of those feelings by themselves or in sum has never made him feel like a man again. He still can recall the left-over aroma of that long-gone feeling lingering inside him and he has longed for it ever since.

He has spent the rest of his years to feel like that again. Every day he has tried. He gave up playing with his toys and began helping around the house. He threw himself into his studies and everyday during school recess, instead of playing football, basketball, or volleyball, he studied. Every year, he had the highest average in his school and later the district. He took language courses after school and mastered English and French. At fourteen he began working at a translation office translating Persian documents into English and French. He remembers after

school walking to his job and watching his classmates defying their parents and the *Pasdars*, dress fashionably and go to parks, cafes, and shopping malls to meet girls. On weekends, when his classmates got together to roam the city, he helped his father with his physiotherapy and his mother with house chores. Inside he laughed at his classmates, because he knew he was on his way to become a man and they were not.

But as graduation drew near, his classmates transformed into young men, walking tall and confidently, talking to storekeepers, janitors, and taxi drivers, demanding and taking what was owed them as men, and Rostam felt like a boy lost in a man's world. As if his classmates had found the secret to building the chrysalises that turned them into men and Rostam was left behind.

He graduated first in his class, school, and the city. He scored in the top 50 from among almost a million in the countrywide university entrance exam and had the choice to defer mandatory military service attend any university and any discipline of his choosing. But instead of deferring his military service, he emulated his father and joined the army – he was sure that the army would make a man of him as it had done of his father.

In his first six months in the army, he learned to make his bed, climb walls, shoot a variety of weapons and eat unidentifiable food. He followed orders of sadistic men, put lean muscles on his lanky body, and lost the hump he had developed to hide his two meter long body. Because he scored so high in marksmanship, the army trained him as an elite sniper. However, when he was to be sent to one of the provinces, his father pulled strings and got him a desk job translating at the Ministry of Defense so that he could stay close to his mother. He spent a year and half in a windowless office translating English and French newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasts, and U.S. Field Manuals.

But the army failed to turn him into a man. After his mandatory two years, he felt just as much a boy as when he entered the army. He wished that there was a war so that he could prove himself worthy of being called a man but he was born too late for that. He left the army and decided to become a husband and a father.

He entered Tehran University last year so that he could get his degree to help him with finding a job in order to be a suitable husband. That is where he met Majid in a computer class. Meeting Majid was the only time in his life that he remembers that he had done something brave. Truly brave. He had watched Majid for weeks be the most charismatic and popular first year student. One day, when as usual he went to class early, he saw Majid sitting on his own. Despite an overwhelming fear inside him, Rostam walked up and sat beside Majid and struck up a conversation. They became fast friends. Rostam doesn't know why Majid chose him as his best friend from among all the boys who flocked to him but Rostam was thankful that he did.

Despite all of Rostam's weaknesses and failings, Majid always treated Rostam as a friend and an equal. In Majid's orbit, for the second time in his life, Rostam felt like a man. Why? Was it dressing fashionably and flirting with girls? Drinking and going to parties? Was it joining an underground student group? Was it because Majid, a man, respected and accepted Rostam as an equal?

Would staying make you a man?

Majid is staying.

Would your father stay?

Rostam knows that his father would stay. He can even hear his father's voice as clearly as the horn on the taxi. "A man stands tall, unafraid, like a lion. I'm my father's son. Seventy years ago, when *Reza-khan* was going to hang my grandfather because he was a *Mashrooteii*, my father

was rode alone from Tabriz to Tehran. He was sixteen years old. Seventy years ago! When there were no roads, bandits roamed the country side and the Russian Cossacks would kill you for a piece of stale bread, that sixteen year old rode alone from Tabriz to Tehran. Your grandfather rode to *Reza-khan*'s palace, forced himself in, and stood before *Reza-khan* and told him to let your great-grandfather go. When *Reza-khan* refused, my father stood nose to nose with *Reza-khan* and said 'I swear to Imam Reza, if you hang my father, I will have Azerbaijan rise against you.'

“*Reza-khan* freed your great-grandfather.

“I am that man's son and no lice-infested, bearded *Hezbollahi* is going to stop me from doing what I think is right.”

That is what his father would say and by the time the taxi arrives at the *Maydan-e-Azadi*, Rostam has decided to stay because that is what a man would do. This is his chance to be brave and a man.

Chapter 7

From where the taxi lets him off, he walks toward the alley where Ebrahim-*khan*'s garage is. The unlit alley is deserted and full of shadows and at its mouth Rostam hesitates for an instant before walking in.

He reaches Ebrahim-*khan*'s garage quickly and walks past it to see if his father has parked the car further up the alley but the alley is empty. Rostam walks back to Ebrahim-*khan*'s garage and leans against its metal doors. They are locked for the evening. He searches his pockets for his cigarettes and lighter. He lights a cigarette and looks down the alley for headlights and then across the alley at the mud walls of a decaying *bagh*, an acre or two of plane, walnut, and mulberry trees used by someone or other during weekends when this part of the city was undeveloped. Now, this dilapidated *bagh* is worth millions. Soon, a developer will buy it, cut down the trees, subdivide it into tiny lots and build small houses and shops or build a large apartment building or a shopping center. In fact, Rostam is surprised that the *bagh* and its trees still stand.

Rostam studies the silhouette of the leafless trees against the dark blue sky and the few stars breaking through the pollution. His mind wonders to the contrast between the old *bagh* and Ebrahim-*khan*'s garage with its new computers for fixing the new Iranian and French built Peugeots. In a story, he would put the *bagh* where the garage is and vice versa – the *bagh* on the east and the garage on the west – to symbolize progress the whole world over, from the dilapidated ancient east to the clean modern west.

Or, would it be better to keep the *bagh* where it is to reverse the expected symbols? To emphasize the importance of Eastern cultures despite the hegemony of the Western culture the world over?

He stops himself from ruminating further. He is too tired. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Rostam's done with stories. He's staying and that means he only has time for action and death.

After a quarter an hour, he lights a second cigarette out of boredom. He inhales deeply and feels nauseous from the smoke and hunger. He studies the stars, finds the Big Dipper and then follows the imaginary line extending from the Big Dipper's chest and locates the North Star, a dull, almost invisible dot in Tehran's polluted sky.

A pair of headlights light up the alley. Rostam quickly drops his cigarette on the ground and snuffs it out with the toe of his army boot.

The car passes him. It is not his father's car. He feels foolish for wasting the cigarette but does not light another one. He feels too sick to his stomach.

After a while, his father's car comes down the alley and stops a few meters from him. His father is in the passenger seat and his mother is driving. Rostam is surprised to see her, having assumed that his father was coming alone but is happy to see her. His father begins to get out of the car. Because of the war wound he suffered to his right knee, his father has some difficulty getting in and out of the car and Rostam walks to the passenger door to help his father.

"You got here alright?" his father asks.

"We packed your army backpack for you," his mother says as she comes around the car. The night makes his mother look small in her full length *manteaux*. Rostam wonders whether it is his image of the cancer ravaging her body that makes her shrink in his mind.

"Thanks. Maman- *joon*, how are you?" Rostam turns to his mother and kisses her on the cheeks.

"I'm fine, my dear, everything will be fine, don't be afraid," she says.

“He’s not afraid,” his father says, “he’s my son, like a lion, I’ve already called your uncle—”

Rostam interrupts his father, “I’m not going to Tabriz, *Pedar*. I’m going to stay here and fight—”

“Don’t waste my time, you’ve got to get out of Tehran,” his father says in Turkish, sounding annoyed rather than angry.

“No, I’m staying, *Pedar*,” Rostam answers in Turkish.

“Please, Rostam- *joon*, don’t be foolhardy, you have to get out,” his mother says in Turkish.

“We don’t have time for this, you’re getting out of Tehran tonight, you’re going to Tabriz,” his father orders.

“No, I want to stay and fight alongside my friends,” Rostam says.

“Fight! You’ll be dead before the night is out. Don’t be stupid.”

“You would stay,” Rostam says.

“No, I wouldn’t,” his father says. Rostam hears the anger in his father’s breathing even if his voice does not betray it. “I’m not a fool. Staying is foolish, not brave.”

“I’m staying.”

“No, you’re not and that’s that, understood?” The colonel is back in his father’s voice. “You stay in Tehran and they’ll kill you. You might as well kill your mother right here, right now. You want a gun? A knife? Kill her right now and be done with it.” His father pushes past him and hobbles on his cane to the other side of the car. “I don’t have time for this. I have to go to the terminal and see if it’s safe.” He stops, turns to Rostam’s mother, and says, “you talk some sense into him.”

Rostam wants to respond to his father, let him know the anger he feels at what his father has just said, but he cannot think of anything. He just stands there, his hand resting on the passenger door he had moments ago opened for his father.

“Go help him,” his mother says and pushes Rostam’s shoulder towards the driver’s side.

Rostam slams the passenger door shut and walks to the other side of the car to help his father get in but his father is already in. “Listen to your mother,” his father says. Rostam closes the door and his father drives away.

Chapter 8

“I have to sit down, I’m exhausted after the drive,” Rostam’s mother says and they both look for a place to sit in the dark alley. “I’m sorry, it’s the cancer.” Rostam remembers the steps leading to from the alley to Ebrahim-*khan*’s office and guides her to them.

“Why didn’t he drive?” Rostam asks but his mother does not answer. She just sits down and stays quiet.

After a few minutes she says, “you smell like a chimney.”

“I just had a cigarette before you came,” Rostam says.

“Your father is a good man, he’s just worried for you.”

Rostam looks at his mother and wishes there were more light in the alley so that he could see her eyes and face more clearly.

“I know but that’s not the point. I’m not a child.”

“Is that why you hide your smoking from him?” she says. Rostam does not answer.

They stay silent for a few minutes and Rostam considers lighting another cigarette but decides against it.

“You know *Pedar* has always known about your smoking. Since you first started when you were sixteen,” his mother says and coughs. “You shouldn’t. Look what it’s done to me.”

Rostam stays silent a moment before he speaks. “He’s never said anything.”

“He told me that he felt you were old enough and man enough to decide for yourself.”

Rostam closes his eyes briefly and then lifts his head to look at the North Star again but can’t find it quickly enough. “I’m scared,” he finally says.

“I know. Any body would be,” his mother says. She gets up from the stairs to wraps her arms around Rostam’s shoulders and Rostam bends his tall body to allow her to do so.

“I don’t want to leave my friends, I don’t want to be a coward.”

“You’re not a coward. Don’t ever say that.”

“I know I’m in danger, I know that if I stay it would be worse for you,” Rostam says and begins to cry, “but I’m worried, I’m worried for Majid and everybody else.”

She rubs his back and holds his head tightly. After his tears have stopped, he straightens up, embarrassed.

“He’s a good friend, isn’t he?” his mother says as she sits back down on the step.

“Yes. He’s going to stay in Tehran, he’s not going back to Kerman. I told him to leave. Everything’s unraveling—”

“You can’t make him leave. He must make his own choice.”

“I’m a failure, a coward.”

His mother stays silent for a long minute before she speaks again, “Did *Pedar* ever tell you about how he got injured?”

“Yes.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Not much, just that his tank got hit and that when he jumped off, he got injured.”

“That’s not all that happened.”

“Why are you telling me this,” Rostam asks exasperated.

“Sit down and listen.”

Rostam sits beside her on the step. She puts her hand on his thigh and pats it. “When *Pedar*’s tank was hit, he was in the turret. Whatever it was that hit the tank did not cause an explosion. It just caused a fire near the back, near the engine. He’s told me that the most dangerous thing in a tank is a fire. It can set off the rounds and fuel instantaneously. Luckily, they

were low on fuel and had only a few rounds left in the turret. Your father immediately ordered evacuation, opened the hatch and pushed out the loader and the gunner. When he then looked below again, all he could see was a fireball. He knew that the tank was going to explode any second. He assumed the driver who was in the main body of the tank was either dead or got out using his hatch. There was nothing your father could do.” Rostam’s mother pauses and coughs, gasping for air. Rostam wants to stop her, not wanting her to exhaust herself, but knows her mother and knows that she would delay her own death to tell a story. “*Pedar* began to get out. As he did, a hand grabbed his ankle. It was the driver – he wanted *Pedar* to pull him out. Your father tried. He tried pulling up himself and the driver but couldn’t. He didn’t have the strength.

“We are talking about a moment, an instance, in which he had to make a decision. In such moments, you father tells me everything slows down. Thoughts raced through his mind. Should he reach down to grab the driver’s hand? Should he keep on trying to pull both himself and the gunner out even though he knew he would fail? Should he kick the hand away from himself and save himself to lead the rest of his battalion? Should he kick the hand so he could get out of the turret and then reach back to pull out the driver? Should he call out to the loader or the gunner for help or would he be risking their lives needlessly? Should he have made sure the driver was safe, before he pushed the gunner and the loader out? Was there enough time before the tank was going to explode? He had to make a choice while facing death.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Rostam does not want to upset his mother and attempts to hide the irritation and anger in his voice, but can’t. “Why are you telling me this, to make me feel worse? That my father rescued that soldier despite all odds. That he is a hero and I am not.”

“No. Listen, please. *Pedar* did not rescue that soldier. He doesn’t remember exactly what he did. The tank exploded and your father, along with the turret, were thrown twenty meters into

the air. The explosion tore apart his knee, ripped a hole in the right side of his torso, obliterated his right kidney, half his bladder, chunks of his small intestine, collapsed his lung, when they found him, they thought he was dead.” By now, she’s breathless and Rostam wishes he had not gotten angry at her. “The driver died in the tank. *Pedar* still tries to remember what he did. Did he call for the gunner and the loader? Did he kick that driver’s hand away? If he didn’t was he going to? Would he have? Would he have reached down for the driver’s hand? If he had gotten out, would he have gone back or would he have just saved his own life? Why couldn’t he pull up himself and the driver? Was it fear or just muscle weakness? Was it that there was not enough time or was the driver caught on something? You have to understand – *Pedar* was his commander. He was your father’s soldier, his charge, his responsibility. The driver was probably no older than you.

She coughs into a tissue. “*Pedar* thinks he acted cowardly that day, not because he may have kicked his soldier’s hand but because the thought occurred to him, and that’s that. *Pedar* still wakes up in the middle of the night feeling the driver’s hand around his ankle. He says when he walks, he feels it is the driver’s hand and his weight that makes him limp.”

The headlights of a car appear in the alley. She looks down the alley. “Here comes your father. Your father is not a coward, no matter what happened in that tank, not even if he kicked the driver’s hand. He is a strong, wonderful man. But, it matters not what I tell him.” She stands up and so does Rostam.

“What did you tell me this story? What does it mean?”

She his face in her hands and kisses him on both cheeks. “You will find your strength. You are not a coward. Go to Tabriz.”

Chapter 9

Rostam's father pulls along side Rostam and his mother. Rostam's father leans over from the driver seat and opens the passenger door. "The terminal looks clear, the bus for Tabriz leaves in about fifteen minutes. Hurry up."

Once Rostam and his mother are in the car, his father says, "I got you a ticket, we'll have to drop you off and you have to get on the bus yourself because if there are *Pasdars* at the terminal, they might recognize us and you through us." Rostam's father makes a left turn at the end of the alley. "Just walk straight to the bus."

"All right."

"Your uncle will pick you up tomorrow morning in Tabriz, I've already called him. I'll come to Tabriz in a few days. But first, I have to stay here and figure out how to get you out of Iran."

"And you *Maman*?" he asks his mother. She does not respond.

They drive quietly through the streets until they come to the bus terminal. His father pulls over and stops. Cars, taxis, and passengers mill around the terminal, the sidewalk, and the street. "We also packed the thirty thousand dollars."

"No, that's for *Maman*, I don't need it," Rostam says. The money is his parent's life savings. They mortgaged their house to put enough money together to send his mother to France for treatment. Rostam's uncle, his mother's brother, offered to pay for the whole trip but his father was too proud to accept the money. "You need that money, *Maman*."

"I don't need it," his mother says.

"You do," Rostam says.

"I've talked to my doctors. There's nothing to be done," his mother says.

“I thought the doctor said that if you act soon enough –”

“You need the money for getting a passport in Turkey and making a life abroad,” his father says.

“I only have a couple of months left,” his mother says. Her voice is flat and affectless. “There is no cure, we didn’t tell you because we didn’t want to worry you.”

Rostam begins to cry. “You’re lying.” Rostam wants to slam the car, kick the floor, do something to emphasize what he’s saying besides just shouting at his sick mother. “I don’t want the money.”

“You’re taking the money, and that’s that, understood?” his father says, “your mother and I have discussed it and it’s decided.”

“Rostam- *joon*, don’t argue. Please. You don’t have much time and I don’t want to see you arrested,” his mother says. “That would kill me.”

Rostam looks at the back of his father’s head, the gray hair is carefully combed and cut every month, short as a soldier’s should be. How could his father let his mother die? An easy calculation in his military mind, probably – she has may have five to ten years left and Rostam has fifty to sixty years left. It’s no use arguing now though. He would only hurt his mother. He’ll take care of it in Tabriz.

“*Maman*, are you coming to Tabriz later?” Rostam asks.

“I don’t know,” She looks at Rostam’s father. “Am I?”

“I don’t know, it depends, I really don’t know,” his father says. “I have to figure things out and decide what to do as things come up. Anyway, right now is not the time to talk about this. Rostam, time to go.”

Rostam and his mother get out of the car. He opens the trunk. His mother says to him, “go say *khoda-hafez* to your father.”

Rostam goes around the car. His father rolls down the window and Rostam bends down and kisses him on both cheeks. His father puts his hand on Rostam’s face. “You’re my son, my father’s grandson. You come from a brave, honorable family. Don’t be afraid of anything. Be careful and don’t trust anyone. Now go. *Khoda-hafez*.”

“*Khoda-hafez*.”

Rostam looks at his mother, in her long *manteaux* and headscarf, her plain face without a shred of make up, the wrinkles, the wet eyes, the cancer raging within her lungs and spreading even now to the rest of her body. He kisses her on the cheeks and then holds her close to his chest. “I don’t want the money.”

“Enough. You have to go. You have only a few minutes. *Khoda-hafez*.”

“*Khoda-hafez*.” Rostam grabs the small back pack of clothes out of the trunk and his own backpack of books, leaps over the storm drain, and runs toward the bus terminal. It is the beginning of the *NowRooz* two week school and work vacation and many are travelling. The street and the terminal are teeming with families, parents herding kids who are running around and begging for lollipops, sour plum *lavashak*, and cheap plastic toys that vendors are selling all around them.

Chapter 10

Rostam finds his bus. It is an older bus belonging to one of the cheaper companies. He climbs the steps and shows his ticket to the driver.

“You’re lucky. I just about left without your grace.”

Smell of diesel, food, and sweat fills his nostrils. Rostam shuffles down the aisle to find an open seat. The one nearest the door is beside a young woman. She looks at him. She is beautiful and he is tempted to sit beside her but he knows that sitting beside her would be inappropriate if not dangerous because he would draw attention to himself. Another seat is beside a bearded man in a suit and a white shirt buttoned up to his neck – he looks like a government worker and Rostam decides it is best to avoid him. The last open seat is near the back and beside a rundown old man, most likely a villager.

Rostam tosses his bags onto the overhead compartment and sits beside the old man.

“*Ya’allah*,” the old man says as soon as Rostam sits down and stands up partially within the confines of his seat. Rostam also stands up partially and says, “*Ya’allah*.” Unable to fit his legs comfortably in the space between the seats, Rostam stretches his legs out into the aisle. “Are you going to Tabriz?” the old man asks in a thick Turkish accent.

Rostam wonders whether he should tell the truth but remembers his father telling him not to trust anyone. He answers in Turkish, “Near Tabriz. And yourself?”

“Back to my village, two hours outside Tabriz.” The old man says the name of the village but it means nothing to Rostam. The old man’s face is covered by an untrimmed, white beard, and his skin is wrinkled and leathery from the harsh sun and cold of the mountains of Azerbaijan.

“What were you doing in Tehran?” Rostam asks to be polite.

“I came to visit my son, he lives in Tehran.”

Rostam does not ask any more questions. He just sits quietly, trying to figure out the point of his mother's story. Good stories are like that, he tells himself. They want you to grow before you understand them.

Was she telling him to give in to his fear, that it's OK to be afraid, a coward? Or that his father was also a coward? No, she said that his father was not a coward, Rostam remembers. Maybe it was just a story to make him leave Tehran, to tell him that he will live through betraying his friends and still be able to live with himself.

The bus, with a shudder, starts backing out of its spot in the terminal. The bus then heads toward the exit to the street.

"*Aeye baba*, what now?" the old man says in Turkish. Rostam turns toward the old man and sees him looking out the window at several Nissans Patrols pulling into the terminal and letting out their cargo of *Pasdars*.

Rostam's heart races. Don't worry, Rostam tells himself. They can't possibly be here for you. You're not that important.

The bus driver continues to drive toward the exit. Rostam stirs in his seat, trying to get a better look at what is happening outside. The bus is almost out of the terminal when a *Pasdar* knocks against the one of the windows with the tip of his G-3 assault rifle. The driver hits the brakes hard and the bus jerks and jostles the passengers. The driver swears and rolls down his window. "What's the matter?"

"Back it in, back it in," the *Pasdar* orders.

"Why?"

"Back it in, I said."

"Give me a second."

“Now!”

“You want an accident?” The driver slowly – more slowly than he needs to, Rostam thinks – backs the bus into the terminal and leaves the bus in the middle of the yard.

Rostam decides to get out of the bus and try to sneak out of the terminal. He gets out of his seat quickly, grabs his bags, and shuffles down the aisle all the while trying to look out the window. He’s near the middle of the bus when the driver opens the door and a *Pasdar* steps in. Rostam stops, realizing that if the *Pasdar* sees him, the *Pasdar* would know Rostam is trying to escape the bus. He starts shuffling back to his seat but the *Pasdar* notices him and they lock eyes. Fear grips Rostam. His legs feel paralyzed like they are stuck in wet cement and want to give out. He is unable to move or think or decide. Breathe, he tells himself. Move. But he just stands frozen in the middle of the aisle.

Someone taps Rostam on the shoulder and Rostam’s neck snaps around to see the old man beside him.

“My son, come back, sit down, I know you hungry but no time to get food, bus leaving soon. I will get you something to eat next stop,” the old man says in his broken Farsi, loud enough for the *Pasdar* to hear him.

Rostam looks at the old man for a moment. Can he trust this man? But what choice does he have? “Yes father,” he says aloud in Farsi. He follows the old man down the aisle, fighting the urge to look back at the *Pasdar*. He takes his seat beside the old man and looks down the aisle. The *Pasdar* is gone.

The old man whispers in Turkish in his ear, “I’ll call you Mohammad. My son’s name.”

Rostam stares at the old man, at his crystalline gray eyes, and the lines the mountains have drawn on his face. He wants an explanation as to why the old man is willing to risk helping him

but he does not know how to ask. Rostam bows slightly in his seat to the old man and says in Turkish, “Thank you very much.”

The old man does not respond. He just turns and looks out the window and says in Turkish, “they’re going from bus to bus.”

Rostam looks over the old man’s head and out the window. He sees a *Pasdar* walk out of another bus and three boys, no older than Rostam, follow the *Pasdar* and behind them another *Pasdar* follows. The three boys stand near the back of the bus and the two *Pasdars* hover near them. One of the three looks very scared and fidgets uncomfortably.

A high ranking *Pasdar* officer and a man in a black suit walk toward the three boys. The man in the suit looks at each of the three who have walked out of the bus and then says something to the *Pasdar* officer who nods his head toward the two *Pasdars* guarding the boys and the three boys are let go and walk back onto their bus. The two *Pasdars* then walk to another bus while the *Pasdar* officer and the man in the black suit walk to another bus to inspect two boys guarded by two other *Pasdars*.

Two *Pasdars* enter Rostam’s bus. They are dressed in green fatigues and each has an AK-47 slung over his shoulder. From his rank, Rostam can see that one is a sergeant and older than the other who is a private. The sergeant walks down the aisle. He is nearly forty-five, fifty years old, with a short grey beard and deep lines around his eyes. The private is no older than Rostam and his unshaven face looks bored. Near the middle of the bus, the sergeant stops beside a boy of fourteen or fifteen seated next to an older woman. The sergeant asks the boy to get up and walk to the front of the bus with the younger *Pasdar*. The boy stands up reluctantly just as the old woman, whom Rostam assumes is the boy’s grandmother, becomes hysterical and begins shouting in a

shrill voice, “why are you taking him, you animals, why are you taking him?” The young *Pasdar* leads the boy away.

“Don’t be afraid, *madar-joon*,” the older *Pasdar* says. “We’re just going to talk to him outside.” The boy’s mother pushes the older *Pasdar*. She hits the older *Pasdar*. She shrieks and cries. Her plain grey *chador* falls down revealing her simple black turtle neck. She tries to push past the older *Pasdar* but the older *Pasdar* just stands in front of her without touching her and just prevents her from reaching the aisle.

“Let me go,” she screams. “Let me go with him.” As she struggles against the older *Pasdar*, her headscarf falls to her shoulder. Her coarse, grey hair is held loosely together at the back by an elastic hair band.

“*Madar-joon*, sit down please. He’s coming back. Sit down. He’ll be back in two minutes,” the older *Pasdar* says.

“I’m not your mother. Don’t call *Madar-joon*. Let me go. My poor grandchild has done nothing.”

“Please, put your headscarf back on, put your *Chador* back on. There are strangers on the bus. Have some shame, some dignity, *madar-joon*.”

“You have some shame, you animal. You are all wild animals. Murderers. May God stab every one of you for every mother’s heart you’ve stabbed. Murderers!” she yells.

A passenger in the row behind the boy’s grandmother gets up from his seat to comfort her, but the older *Pasdar* barks at him to sit down. Rostam looks out the window but cannot see where the younger *Pasdar* has taken the boy. The boy’s grandmother continues to scream at the older *Pasdar*. A few minutes later, the boy returns to the bus, followed by the younger *Pasdar*.

“See *madar-joon*. Here he is. Nothing to worry about.” He steps away as the boy reaches his seat. “Here, take care of your grandmother.” The older *Pasdar* then walks toward Rostam. He looks tired and walks more like a bureaucrat than a *Pasdar-e-Enghellab*, a guardian of a revolution.

“*Baradar*, where are you going?” the older *Pasdar* asks Rostam.

“We’re going back to our village.” Rostam says the name of the old man’s village.

“We are shepherders,” the old man answers.

“What were you doing in Tehran?”

“To see his cousin get married,” the old man answers again.

“Ok, come on. Get off the bus.”

“No, no, what do you want with him?” the old man shouts, putting his arm across Rostam’s chest and preventing him from standing up, as if Rostam were his own son.

“Come on, get up.” The younger *Pasdar* grabs the Rostam’s coat at his shoulder, pushes aside the old man’s arm, and lifts up Rostam. He then shoves Rostam down the aisle. Rostam reaches for his bag but the *Pasdar* stops him. “Leave it here. Come on, let’s go.”

The old man gets up from his seat. “No, no, don’t take my son,” the old man shouts. Rostam looks back and sees the old man grab the sleeve of the older *Pasdar*. “Leave him. I swear to the Prophet Mohammad, Imam Ali, he’s not done anything.”

The older *Pasdar* turns toward the old man who is by now in the aisle and is pushing against the *Pasdar*. “*Pedar-joon*, he’ll be back in two minutes. You saw the other boy come back. Sit down.” The *Pasdar* pushes the old man back to his seat. “Come on, *Pedar-joon*, let us do our job and he’ll be back in two minutes. Please, *pedar-joon*, sit down.”

Once outside the bus, the younger *Pasdar* points to a spot a quarter of a way down the side of the bus and says, “Stand there.”

The older *Pasdar* comes out of the bus after several minutes. He asks the younger one, “Hassan, where’s the guy?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “He went to another bus after he told me to let the other boy go. What took you so long?”

The older *Pasdar* does not answer his question and instead tells Rostam, “Sit down here,” motioning to the small platform inside the open door of the bus. The older *Pasdar* then walks away from Rostam while reaching for a pack of cigarette in his shirt pocket.

“That will kill you,” the younger one says.

The older *Pasdar* walks to the other end of the bus and lights his cigarette. “I fought for four years at the front and did not get a scratch. God will protect me.”

The younger *Pasdar* follows the older one and says, “God doesn’t protect us from our own stupidity.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“So, what took you so long?”

“His father was upset.”

“I don’t blame him. My father would be in a dither, too,” the younger *Pasdar* says. “In a way, I hope we don’t find whoever it is. God have mercy on his soul.”

“You better not talk like that in front of the guy from *Ete’aalat*.”

The man in black suit is from the dreaded *Ete’aalat*, Rostam thinks. Majid was right in thinking that *Ete’allat* was after the student. How could he have known? Is this what he meant

when he said to Rostam that there are things that Rostam does not know about? What else does Majid know?

Learning that *Ete'allat* is involved knocks the wind out of Rostam. He concentrates even harder to hear every word the two *Pasdars* are saying. To calm himself, he reaches inside his pants for his pack of cigarettes. His hands shake terribly and he drops the first cigarette soon as he takes it out of the pack. He picks it up and blows the dirt off of it. He takes out his lighter and tries to hold the flame steady to light his cigarette. He takes a deep drag off the cigarette as it lights. He prays that it calms him. Instead, the nausea he had felt in front of *Ebrahim-khan's* garage returns.

“Look, I’m not saying anything, God be my witness. It just pains me to see someone my age suffer.” the younger *Pasdar* continues. “We call everyone *baradar*, don’t we? If they are our brothers, why shouldn’t I wish no harm to come to them?”

“Not if they want to betray the revolution and all we fought for, not if they want to sell ourselves to the Americans and Zionists, not if they’re infidels and apostates. Better that they suffer than stop us from getting God’s work done.”

“Of course, of course,” the younger one says. He sounds bored to Rostam. “You’re right but these students are young. Their teacher are at fault. Look, we’re all God’s creatures, aren’t we?”

“Yes. But if they’ve been corrupted, what are we to do? Wait and see if they change? By then the Americans and the Zionists would take over our country just as they did when they arranged the coup against Mossadeqh and brought back the Shah. Look what happened to Palestinians, what is happening to them, look at Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, every other Muslim country in the Middle East. We are the only Muslim country that is continuing the Prophet’s work, peace be upon him.”

“But, listen, what I’m saying is—”

“You’re giving me a headache.” The older *Pasdar* shoos away the younger *Pasdar* with his hand. “Just go get that guy from *Ete’allat* and bring him here. This guy’s father is going to have a heart attack,” the older *Pasdar* orders. As the young man turns to leave, the older *Pasdar* adds, “and stop talking like this. If something happens to you, I have to answer to your mother.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the younger one says as he walks away.

The younger *Pasdar* is not twenty paces away when he turns and shouts, “He’s coming.”

Rostam looks to where the younger *Pasdar* is walking back from. Rostam sees an older *Pasdar* approach them from some distance away. He is the officer Rostam had seen before. As he gets closer, Rostam can see that he is a colonel. When he looks at Rostam and their eyes lock, Rostam looks down and away at his cigarette and then raises it to his lips and inhales it deeply. Rostam then looks back in the direction of the colonel and sees the man in the black suit walking behind the colonel. He wears a white collarless shirt, buttoned to the top and no necktie. His face is covered by a three or four day, as the faces of all un-bearded government officials are and the reason why many young university shave every morning and sometimes a second time in the afternoon. As they near the bus, the older *Pasdar* puts out his cigarette and walks toward Rostam. The man in the black suit looks at Rostam briefly. He then speaks to the colonel. His mouth hardly moves as he says, “OK.”

“*Baradar*,” the younger *Pasdar* starts. “He is from a village outside—”

The colonel interrupts him. “Take him to the car, let the bus go.”

“But, his father is on the bus, he is —”

The man in the black suit turns on the young *Pasdar* and snaps, “So get his father, too.”

The older *Pasdar* flicks his head toward the bus door and with that gesture orders the younger *Pasdar* to get the old man. The younger *Pasdar* opens his mouth to speak but the look on the older *Pasdar's* face shuts him up.

Rostam feels dreadful. He has now entangled the old man into his mess. He has to stop the *Pasdars* now. “No,” he says. His voice is hoarse and shaky and meek. He speaks again, forcing himself to speak louder, “Please, he is just a –“

But he is interrupted by the blaring horns of a late model, black BMW pulling into the bus terminal's yard. “It's Majid's car” is Rostam's first thought. But it can't be. Why would Majid be here? It's probably just the same model car. Rostam tries to read the license plate but he is at a bad angle. A *Pasdar* gets out of the driver seat and opens the rear passenger door for another *Pasdar*, another colonel. The driver then runs to the other side to open the other passenger door but by the time he reaches there, the passenger door has been opened and Rostam sees Majid get out of the car.

Majid's been arrested, Rostam thinks. If so, the others must have been arrested also.

Rostam forgets his own predicament and starts to think of how he can help his friend. What if he tells the colonel here that Majid is innocent, that it was all Rostam's doing, that Majid's just an innocent bystander.

And the old man too. Don't forget the old man, he remembers.

Yes, that is what he must do.

Majid walks to the front of the car. His hands are not tied and no one seems to be concerned with guarding him.

Rostam is confused. Isn't Majid under arrest?

“*Baradar Sartip, Baradar Sartip,*” The *Ete’allat* agent beside Rostam shouts and raises his arm. “Over here, *Baradar.*”

Majid quickly walks over towards Rostam and the *Pasdar* colonel follows him. When they reach Rostam and the others, Majid looks at Rostam briefly and it is the same look that has told Rostam to shut up a thousand times when they have been at parties and Rostam has been about to say something to scare a girl away. Majid snaps at the *Ete’allat* agent in a tone alien to his voice, “What’s going on here?”

“*Baradar* General, he was trying to escape. We found him, sir.”

Majid is a General in *Ete’allat* or *Sepah-e-Pasdaran*? The thought throws Rostam’s mind into an uncontrollable turmoil, a seizure, a storm of thoughts, emotions, and sensations and Rostam drifts aimless in that storm, buffeted about, limp and unnerved, dazed and drowning. He hears words but cannot understand their meanings. Are they from the conversation going on about him or from other, more ancient, conversations? Are they even words? Later on, he will always remember, from all that happened in those few moments, the smell of diesel fumes growing in potency within him, the voice of a woman from across the yard calling to her son, “come here, you’re going to be the end of me,” and a mental image of Ali, Jaffar, the Twins and many others being dragged behind the doors of the *Evin* prison to their death.

His peripheries turn dark and he feels that he is going to collapse.

Fight it. Find a focus, an anchor, something solid to hold onto, he tells himself. Despite himself and the hate he suddenly feels toward Majid, Rostam wishes he could reach out to Majid, as he has done so many times this past few months, to steady himself.

But he can’t.

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah,

Ashhadu an Mohammed-un Rasool Allah.

The chant repeats itself in his mind. Its foreign Arabic rhythm steadies him.

Breathe. Come on, take a deep breath.

He hears Majid say, “This is not him.”

“But, sir, I personally saw him enter your—” the *Ete’aallat* man interjects.

“I said it’s not him. You have difficulty hearing me?”

“No, *Baradar* General.”

“Let him go,” Majid says to the two *Pasdars* guarding Rostam. He then looks at Rostam.

The plastic scar tissues of his face masks any hint of familiarity, friendship or betrayal. “*Baradar*, we’re sorry for bothering you.” Majid extends his hand and Rostam takes it without thinking.

“Please get on the bus. Keep going without stopping until you reach your destination and no one will bother you on your travels again.” Majid then firmly squeezes Rostam’s hand.

Chapter 11

Back on the bus, Rostam sits back down beside the old man. He feels disoriented and hollow, like a sheep on *eyd-e-ghorban*, its throat cut, its entrails splayed, hung upside down, its skin pulled clean off, and its flesh exposed for all to partake of.

The bus jolts and then maneuvers out of the bus terminal.

Rostam's heart is beating fast. His shirt is soaked through and through with sweat. An electric shiver runs along his entire body starting at his head and down along his spine and makes his body convulse momentarily. His hands and feet are clammy and his head is feverish. His teeth clatter uncontrollably. He vomits in his mouth, the vomit burning his throat and chest. He instinctively swallows the vomit only to vomit again. He can't figure out if it is the shock of the fear and betrayal he just experienced or something else that has thrown his mind into a feverish vertigo. He keeps his eyes closed and searches and searches for anything solid to grasp so to stop the swirling vertigo of thoughts in his mind and he finds it in the old man's smell. He clutches at its faint but real presence in his nostrils and lungs. He breathes it in deeply.

The Muslim creed continues to repeat in his head:

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah,

Ashhadu an Mohammed-un Rasool Allah.

How much time has passed? Minutes, hours, or just a few moments? Rostam doesn't know. He wills the prayer to stop. He does not believe in the words. They are the words of his father, a trick his father taught him when he came back from the war.

“During the war, when I was worried for you and your mother and feared I would never see you again, I would tell myself to breathe and did as the Sufis did and repeated to myself:

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah,

Ashhadu an Mohammed-un Rasool Allah.

“My little Rostam, do the same. Don’t be scared. Know that God is always there with you.”

But Rostam does not believe in God. Even if he once did, how could he after tonight’s betrayal?

“The one with the injured face knew you?” the old man says in Turkish.

Rostam opens his eyes and looks at the old man. He would rather not talk, close his eyes, and forget that it had been Majid all along. “He was from the Ministry of Information and Internal Security,” he says in Turkish.

How can Majid be a *Sartip*? He is only thirty. Can you become a one star General at the age thirty? Maybe he is not thirty years old. Maybe he is older. Given the extensive skin graft across his face and body, there was no way to tell. If he is that high ranking, why would he infiltrate the student himself?

Why did Majid send the *Pasdars* to Rostam’s house? Did he want to force Rostam to leave? Did he want the others in the group to suspect Rostam so as to take attention away from himself? Or did the other *Ete’allat* agent send the *Pasdars* without Majid knowledge?

If that is the case, why did Majid come to terminal? Why did he let Rostam go? A final act of friendship? Guilt? A gift? A reward? Rostam remembers the sensation of Majid’s last handshake, the sweat, the force of the squeeze, the feel of the smooth, grafted skin. Majid made the arrangement between them as clear as a mountain river’s water – Rostam must leave and go to Turkey without contacting anyone or Rostam will die along with the other students. Rostam gets to escape with his life while others will be arrested, tortured, and executed. They will all die

because Rostam, with all his stories and lies, dressed a wolf as a sheep and brought him into the fold.

His eyes begin to burn with tears and a heavy weight descends down on his chest.

The old man says, "Are you well? I have food."

He does not want to be rude to the old man but he does not want to talk either. "No thank you. I am OK."

He turns in his chair away from the old man and closes his eyes again. He cannot stop his tears. He still feels dizzy but he must try to concentrate. He must think through what has happened tonight. He must do something to save the others. But what?

He had been such a fool. He had not sensed anything about Majid. Rostam's father had known from the start that there was something wrong about Majid. The first time they met, Rostam's father said, "Rostam, I don't like Majid. Don't trust him. He's hiding something."

How did his father know? Rostam wanted so desperately to be friends with Majid that nothing his father said would have changed Rostam's mind. He does not remember a single instance when doubt about Majid had entered his mind. It is true that he had always wondered why someone as socially graceful Majid would choose the inept Rostam for a friend. But he was just thankful that Majid chose him as his closest friend and suppressed any doubts about Majid's motives, if there was ever any. And Majid never gave Rostam any reason to doubt Majid's genuine friendship for him or to heed his father's warning.

Rostam thinks back to the drunken night Majid asked him to join the student movement. It was at a party where whiskey and vodka flowed like the Qur'anic rivers of milk and honey in the heaven and the mixture mangled Rostam's brain but still did not give him the courage to talk to a girl who was eyeing him.

Noticing the girl, Majid said, “Come on, Rostam, she wants you” and then nudged Rostam’s arm with his shoulder. “There’s even a bedroom upstairs. Just don’t mess up my coat.”

Rostam stared at the girl for a moment as she smiled at him. He looked away and at Majid’s mask-like face. “I can’t think of a thing to say. I’m completely blank. Drunk.”

“Just ask about her. She’ll do the talking.”

“I can’t.”

The music was blaring. It was Iranian rap from Los Angeles, Rostam remembers. There were boys and girls dancing, kissing, and drinking. Rostam and Majid had to shout into each other ears to hear each other.

“Don’t worry, my brother. Let’s talk about something else.” Majid then took a sip of his vodka. “Look, someone approached me about joining an underground student movement.”

“Are you serious? You can get killed.”

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“Politics and partying are different. The regime will kill you for politics.”

“Anyway, I am not sure what to do because I’m already part of an army movement.”

“What?”

“We’re planning a coup, a group of officers.”

“Maybe this is not the place to talk about this.”

“Don’t worry. You think anyone else can hear me? I can’t even hear you.”

“But you were not an officer. You were a *Baseji*?”

“It doesn’t matter, look at my face. I could be your dad and you wouldn’t know it. Anyway, this student group is planning something and I can leverage my connection to the military group to get into the leadership cell and vice versa.”

“You want a military government.”

“No, the officers want to suppress the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* and topple the government. They want a democratic republic. They want to cut out the Islamic part.”

“You trust them?”

“Yes.” Majid then sips more of his vodka and leans further into Rostam. “I want to bring you with me into the student group.”

“They wouldn’t trust me.”

“They would if we say we knew each other since high school and served in the army together.”

It was a few days after that night that Rostam and Majid began meeting Ali and Jaffar in Jaffar’s room. By that time, Rostam and Majid had worked on their stories. Rostam had always thought the purpose of those stories were to convince Jaffar and Ali to allow him to join the leadership cell and he had been thankful to Majid. But now Rostam realizes that those stories were meant to give credibility to Majid.

Rostam opens his eyes and looks outside. They are driving along the highway to Karaj and Qazvin. On either side houses, shops, and apartment buildings have risen from the ground in the past ten years haphazardly creating a characterless, shapeless mass of humanity. These are the people that he planned to fight for when he joined the student movement, Rostam thinks.

But that’s not true, is it? He did not join the student movement to fight for these people; he joined the group because he wanted Majid’s respect and he wanted to feel like a man. It all seemed like a game to him.

And now?

If Majid had only betrayed him, it wouldn't matter as much, Rostam thinks. But Rostam not only played with his own life but the lives of others. He might not have known and he might even not have been able to know that Majid was an *Ete'allat* agent, but it is nevertheless true that everyone else in the student movement will now pay for his foolishness in blindly trusting Majid, in never questioning that trust, and in helping Majid fool Jaffar and the rest. He should've listened to his father. His foolishness is going to cause many deaths.

He must do something. Anything. He has to act but he does not know what to do. The *Ete'allat* agent said that he had seen Rostam go into Majid's house which probably means they have pictures of him and they also know where he leaves. The same must be true of Jaffar, Ali, Hossein, and Koorosh. *Ete'allat* agents most likely have been following and observing them all for weeks. If Rostam goes back to Tehran and try to approach any one of them, he would most likely cause the arrests of everyone without accomplishing anything. But, maybe, he could go back to Tehran, hide, and try to warn the others about Majid by telephone. That is the best plan.

Where would he hide? What if Majid does not have people in Tabriz right now waiting for him to follow him to make sure he does not go back to Tehran? Rostam feels unsure. He cannot decide. He does not trust his own instincts after the debacle with Majid.

He wonders what his father would do. His father had sensed Majid's duplicity from the beginning. What would his father do in Rostam's place? Rostam tries to think as his father would. "In war, hope for the best but plan for the worst," his father always said. Tonight, his father assumed that their phone in Tehran was bugged just because a couple of *Pasdars* showed up at their door. So Rostam should assume that Majid will have people in Tabriz to follow him and make sure he does not go back to Tehran or contact anyone else from the movement. Rostam's uncle's phone will likely be bugged. He has to also assume that any action that would indicate

that he is going to contact Jaffar, Ali, Koorosh, or Hossein will result in them being rounded up before they have chance to escape.

The only thing Rostam can think of doing is to try to warn the others by calling them from public phones. *Ete'allat* will likely be listening on the phones of Ali, Jaffar, Koorosh, and Hossein and Rostam calling them to warn them will cause their arrests sooner than intended. Of course, there is no doubt that Majid will eventually arrest all of them anyway, but perhaps there will be an hour or more between Rostam's telephone call and the time when *Ete'allat* comes to arrest time, perhaps enough time for saving some of the students to be warned and go into hiding.

It is a weak idea and it all depends on Ali, Jaffar, Koorosh, or Hossein believing him when he tells them about Majid being an *Ete'allat* agent. Even now that idea seems so preposterous that Rostam has to force himself to believe it. Who would *want* to believe such a thing about their friend and leader? And even if they were capable of believing such a thing, why would they believe it coming from Rostam? Ali already thinks he's a snitch. Jaffar, even if he were capable of believing Rostam, will be dissuaded by Ali and his own desire to trust in Majid and avoid seeing his movement peter out. The Twins, as always, would follow whatever Ali and Jaffar decide. And Rostam does not know anyone else in the cells Majid recruited and, in retrospect, is not sure if Majid's cells even exist.

One more thing occurs to Rostam. Majid will likely very soon inoculate himself by having others believe Rostam is the snitch. If that happens, any warning by Rostam becomes even more meaningless.

If warning others would just risks his own life, the lives of his family, and the lives those he warns, would it be best not to do anything?

What would his father do in his place?

Chapter 12

The old man taps on his shoulder. “If you would not mind, I need to grab my *bogh-cheh* to have my dinner,” the old man says in Turkish.

“Of course,” Rostam answers back, also in Turkish.

Rostam steps into the aisle and watches the old man stand up and reach for his old-fashioned *bogh-cheh* in the baggage compartment above the seats. Rostam towers over the old man and when the old man cannot reach his *bogh-cheh*, Rostam gets it for him.

“You are, *masha'allah, masha'allah*, very tall.”

“Like a giant telephone pole.”

The old man smiles. “My son was taller than me, but never as tall as you.” The old man winces as he sits back down in his seat.

“Are you in pain?” Rostam asks.

“Just old. Getting old is tiring and painful. When you're old, you're tired and in pain all the time, so often that you're happy when it is your time. God has made us such that we will be happy when it is our time to die. He is telling me that it is going to be soon my time and I don't mind it.”

The old man places his *boghcheh* on his lap. His *boghcheh* is nothing more than a square piece fabric, perhaps a piece of his wife's old *chador*, a thinned out, simple grey fabric pockmarked with small, fading white flowers with red centers, each opposing corner knotted together to create small ball in which the old man has his dinner. After untying the knots, he spreads the *bogh-cheh* across his lap. Inside the *boghcheh*, the old man has a plastic container and some bread. He opens the plastic container and inside it, Rostam sees a block of cheese.