

CHAPTER I

4 Tir 1369
June 25, 1990

Yasaman Azizam,

Your letter broke our hearts. Baba does not sleep anymore. Truthfully, neither do I. He walks around the house at night like a sleepwalker searching for something he has lost. I tell him you are a grown woman. Thirty-five years old! You have your own life now, but in my heart this does not change anything. I say this only to make him feel better. You do not understand that no matter how old you are or how accomplished, you are still our only child, our baby *joon*. Nothing can change that. You are our love and our life even if we are far away. I do not know if you can really understand the strength of our love for you until someday, *insha'Allah*, you become a parent yourself. The love between parent and child is unequal. You can never love your parents more than they love you.

You may be American born, but, *azizam*, you are one hundred percent Irani in your blood and have been brought up in our culture. How can you disgrace yourself and your family by living with this Justin fellow before a proper marriage? How can you be so selfish and not think about

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your parents, who have sacrificed everything to bring you into this world? I want to tell you to not let him take away your precious jewels, that you should save yourself for your husband, but I think it is too late for that now. So I want to scream this now at my daughter, I want to shake you into listening to your mother, but what is the use? Your father, who cannot keep any secrets, even when he swears to keep them upon the grave of his mother, has not told a word of this to our family here. That is how ashamed we are.

Who is this character Justin, anyway? Who has tricked you into letting him move into your life? You tell me he is a high school teacher as if I should be proud. My dear lady doctor, you have the highest graduate degree possible. You went to the top schools. Do you not think that it is a step down to be with a man who does not have an MD or a Ph.D.? You need a man who is your equal, someone to challenge your brilliant mind. In my heart, I always hoped you would find a nice Iranian boy as good as yourself, but I did not let myself pray too hard for this. And I never dreamed you would be with a man from a broken family. Nobody recovers from the trauma of divorced parents. You say he is a wonderful man, kind, generous, and loving. I hope, *azizam*, that this is true. I hope he is worthy of you and makes you happy. But mostly I want to make sure he loves you enough to make the commitment of marriage. *Joony*, you should be thinking about having children at this age. Are you sure you are not wasting your time on a substandard man?

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Americans have such a romantic and unrealistic picture of marriage in their heads. They think they must fall in love before marrying a man. Do you not see that they have it all wrong? Love comes with time, with really knowing each other, with suffering through your differences. Do you think I loved your father when I married him? No! It took me years before I knew what love is. And now we have been married almost fifty years. Just look at the divorce rates in America. More than half of married couples break off their commitment, even when they have children who will surely suffer. Americans do not stick by things. They want everything to be happy and easy all the time. They do not understand that marriage first means compromise.

Your father is an old man. This week, since your letter has arrived, I have seen him raise his fist in rage and protest this terrible situation as if he were a stubborn youngster again. "I do not care if she wins the Nobel Prize. Yasaman is a failure. She is dead to me if she never marries!" Maybe he is too harsh, your father. You have worked so hard all of your life, *joony*, but a part of what Baba says is true. No matter how great of a doctor you are, and I am sure that you are, you will always feel like a failure until you have a good husband and stable family life.

I blame myself for this. I should have taken you home to Iran after you finished medical school. I should have kept a closer eye on you and not let you become so Americanized. Like a fool, I even changed your name from Yasaman to Jasmine to make it easier for the *farangis* to say. I was

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younger then, very naive. I did not realize that simple changes like that could forever take our daughter away from us.

You must remember how much we gave up so that you could succeed. We left our friends, family, and country. Your father left his thriving business to make sandwiches in a deli and drive a taxi. He suffered the humiliation of being treated as a dirty, uneducated immigrant. I changed diapers and wiped the bottoms of retarded children left in institutions to pay our infertility doctors' bills. I, who had never had to work a day in my life, was raised in a house of servants, and taught English and French to private students just to keep myself busy.

Having a child was the only thing missing from our lives. We had the perfect life in Iran, except for you. We sold everything to come to the United States, so that we could have the best doctors. You cannot imagine the embarrassment we went through for this problem. Your father felt that he was not a real man or proper husband before making me pregnant. Everyone blamed me for not being able to carry out my wifely duties. Some backward relatives of your father's even suggested he get a second wife. We had to make our problem a public matter when we filed the papers for immigration. Afterward we went through so much testing, all the humiliating questions the doctors asked us. But we were very determined from the start. And after thirteen years of marriage, God finally brought you to us. But now I see our prize and joy destroyed because we left you in that immoral country alone.

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Thank goodness your father cannot write English, and for once I am happy that you cannot read Farsi. As hard as these words sound to you from your own mother, know that your father would be one thousand times harsher. So listen to me, *dokhtaram*. Whatever you do, do not let yourself become pregnant with this Justin fellow unless you marry him. I beg you, do not mention his name again or remind us about your living situation. We are dying of embarrassment here and no one knows your dirty secret. Imagine if your uncles find out or if Mamani Joon, God rest her soul, had known about this before she died. Please do what I say. Know that we want the absolute best for you in this life.

Your maman loves you.

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FEBRUARY 19, 1997

Aria Talahi Avery, 5, of Seattle died on February 17 in a motor vehicle accident. She was a kindergarten student at Lakeview Elementary. She is survived by her mother, Dr. Jasmine Talahi, Clinical Associate Professor of Oncology at the University of Washington. Memorial service to be held on South Beach, Discovery Park, on February 23 at 2 P.M. In lieu of flowers, donations accepted to Committee to Help Iranian Children & Orphans, c/o Nahid Kashef, PO Box 9347, Bellevue, WA 98004.

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February 25, 1997

Dear Maman,

Might your resentment and detachment dissolve if you hear what tragedy has befallen your daughter? Or perhaps you will feel vindicated? My precious daughter, Aria, the love of my life, the product of my joyful union with Justin, has been killed. You have been robbed of a granddaughter.

Dear Mother,

My daughter, Aria, has died. Perhaps you will feel this is my due for living in the modern world, for rejecting my strict Muslim upbringing. You never reached that point of acceptance as a parent where you let your child fly with the wings and roots you provided. No, you never trusted me nor understood me. Instead, you used guilt to try to control me. But you have failed and here I am ALONE.

Maman,

When I was little, I used to sit beside Mrs. Kendall at the piano and feign sobs as she played that Chopin prelude in E minor. God knows I could have inherited your genes for the real thing, or perhaps I was just mimicking your bitter immigrant blues. But since then, I am with dry eyes. I seem to have adopted the stoic gaze of the Americans you despise, despite a monumental dose of bad luck. I had to have an abortion in college from a single accident. Then the love of my life and my future husband died suddenly in his

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sleep. And now, the worst possible fate: my daughter, Aria,
has been killed.

My darling Aria is dead, Maman Joon, and so is my purpose
in life.

Here is some news to add to your martyr complex,
Mother. God has stolen from you the chance to meet your
only grandchild.

Your accursed Yasaman

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April 18, 1997

Dear Dottie,

I am in the desert to be far away. I need distance from the garden, the bulbs Aria planted never to see bloom, the spring she did not know.

I never told you this: the night before our uncharacteristically silent drive to the airport, I returned to that fatal corner. As the neighborhood slept, I retraced her steps. I crouched behind those rhododendron bushes for hours, now surrounded by daffodils. I imagined every possible angle of her run to home base. As the sun rose, sharp pains stabbed my chest when I did not see her faint bloodstains on the pavement, even though they had long since been washed away by the heavy rains. Somehow I expected to find some trace of her. The first time, I found her missing left shoe in the forget-me-nots by the Gregorys' basketball hoop. It was still warm with her touch. There was a tiny hole in the big toe. How had I not noticed this before? Am I a terrible mother? How had this happened?

I want nothing to do with Rainier Lane, the house. I cannot thank you enough for moving in to take care of things while I am away. I know you noticed that I did everything I could to avoid Aria's room, the entire upper floor. It is too much to see her things, never to be touched by her again. It is worse than you think, though. I actually changed my morning route to work to avoid passing by Lakeview Elementary. I skipped entire sections in the grocery store. At the hospital, I took convoluted paths

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through the underground parking lot so that I would not have to walk by University Daycare. All those children still alive.

When Emilia d'Oro put the keys to her Arizona cottage into my palm after grand rounds some weeks ago, she raved about this place. She claimed to find deep peace in the Sonoran Desert after her painful divorce and invited me to stay as long as I needed. Maybe that gave me a glimmer of hope. I was desperate to do something constructive. I needed a break from all the reminders of Aria's accident. I was never really drawn to the desert before, so who knows why I imagined it might be a healing space for me. I must admit there is something slightly appealing about it now: the scorching sun, the rough and inhospitable sand, and the cacti in their prickly solitude. The dry vegetation, empty spaces, and barren landscape echo my mood. Besides, travel has always been a solace for me, "my tranquilizer of choice," you called it once. So here I am. I hope you realize this is not a rejection of you. I love and appreciate you so much. I know that if there were any hope of getting on with my life in Seattle, you would have made me do it.

I came to the desert expecting dishwater grays and dust. Little did I know that there are so many flowers here: primroses, poppies, lupines, lilies, and many others that I cannot name. There are bees in the desert. Did you know this? They live in solitary tunnels.

Pliers are a must for any desert household as cactus spines make no hesitation about lodging themselves into

human skin should they be ruffled. Cactus taxonomy would interest you most about this place: There are chollas named teddy bear (not for hugging), pencil (though the branches are more the size of a calligraphy pen), and devil (known to stop people in their tracks). Like the human body, cacti have spines and ovaries, areoles and tubercles. We are not separate.

Alas, there is no comfort for me here. It is like walking into a giant cathedral. I can admire the architecture, peer at the stained-glass windows, and even appreciate the fine paintings of Christ before his death by exsanguination. But I actually loathe the desert for its arid beauty.

To the Guatemalan highlands I go next. Ever since Justin first told me about his Peace Corps days, I have wanted to visit his village. More than this is my desire to feel close to Justin in a place that has had so much meaning for him. I need to tell him the story of our daughter.

Love,
Your Desert Bee

P.S. You can reach me by poste restante in Guatemala:

Jasmine Talahi
Lista de Correos
Quetzaltenango
Guatemala

April 21, 1997

Mamani Joonam,

Thirty-five years since I last inhaled your rosewater and cigarette scent, but I remember you vividly. I am an adult now, a doctor and mother even, but all I crave is to be an infant again swaddled by your love. Maman and Baba have not spoken to me in so long. They have given up on me. They feel betrayed that I stayed in America, that I never once came to see them in Iran. I must admit that Iran is the last place on earth where I belong. Now that you are not there, it feels pointless to go.

Oh, dearest grandmother, I have forgotten our secret language, but somehow I am sure you understand me anyway. How to tell you this terrible news? But I can talk to you with an open heart. The thought of you still comforts me. I confess that I have not had the nice, easy life in America that you envisioned for me. My beautiful girl, Aria, who inherited your wisdom and love for roses, is gone. Maman abandoned her before she was even born. Her poor American grandmother has been too ill to be involved in Aria's life. If you had been alive, I know you would have cherished her, saved her.

Once, while visiting our local nursery, Aria was mesmerized by the dark red petals of the pomegranate rose. She closed her eyes, smelled intensely, and insisted we plant that very bush in our garden. Of course I agreed. It was a sign that she had connected with you. She never tasted the tart, pithy fruit of my childhood, those glistening rubies you

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collected for me with your tireless, arthritic hands, but she knew.

There are so many things to wish for these days, Mamani Joonam. Where do I begin? First, that I had finished growing up by your side, or that we could have at least visited each other during our many years of separation. Those static-filled, painfully brief phone calls were too infrequent and inadequate to express my true feelings for you. Second, that I could have taken care of you when you were ill. Above all, I hope you know that I have loved you with all my heart since the day I was born. I shall never forget you.

Your Yasaman

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May 1, 1997

My dearest Aria,

Mama has just landed in a country called Guatemala. It is in Central America, between North and South America, just below Mexico. Do you remember our trip to Oaxaca? The little sombrero I stuck on your head to protect you from the bright sun? You were just a baby, but maybe you can remember everything now. Mama has not forgotten your birthday. How could I? It is the best day of my life. I have been collecting birthday presents for you. So, come out, come out, wherever you are!

Love love love you,
Mama

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May 4, 1997

My dear Justin,

Riding the buses in Guatemala is sensory overload. First there is the aggressive recruiting at the terminal. A little nod upon hearing your destination and before you know it, the conductor has whisked away your bag, tossing it like a hot potato to his assistant on the roof.

You must wonder what I am doing here, following your route to Ixcheltenango, mounting the stairs of what could have been my childhood school bus: a Blue Bird with a plaque above the driver's seat identifying it as property of the Alameda County Certified School District, 1966.

You must be thinking: Why now? Am I too late? Am I disturbed to be doing this? There are things I must tell you, and somehow it feels right to talk with you here where you spent two of the most formative years of your life. Where to start? How to recount the last six years for you? I might be going crazy, but I know this is the right thing to do.

There are three of us to a seat, sometimes four or five if the children sit on laps. Then there are those unlucky souls in the aisle whose knuckles are like clamshells from grasping the overhead bars. Not that they have any place to fall. We are packed like kernels on a corn cob. There is no escaping human touch. Miraculously, the conductor makes his way to the back, collecting money, weaving through short, compact bodies like a fish in dense seaweed. Reaching the end, he exits through the emergency door and climbs to the roof while the bus moves forward at full speed. On his stomach, he slithers

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his way to the front of the bus and hoists himself back into the door when we stop. I feel like this conductor operating at dizzying speed, only I do not know where I am going.

At the crossroads, as soon as the bus slows, there is an invasion by troops of young girls and boys carrying loads of food and drink on their heads. “*Chuchitos, chuchitos. Aguas, aguas. Maní, maní.*” The clever ones climb up the sides of the bus. They offer their goods through an open window. One- and two-quetzal notes fly between hands.

Do you remember our “Ode to Conception” party? How silly our invitation sounds now, but we were giddy with love. You always had a way of bringing out the lighthearted girl in me.

Outwitting the steadfast guardians of zygote formation, Justin’s plucky sperm has conspired with Jasmine’s maverick of an ovum. The rumors are true: We are pregnant! You are not the only ones who are stunned. Nature (i.e., faulty birth control) has disregarded our carefully constructed calendar and will deliver our baby sometime around Mother’s Day.

We will soon get our act together for a wedding of some sort, but in the meanwhile, Jasmine’s retching—enough to last her a lifetime of empathy with her cancer patients—demands libations to the nausea goddess! We will provide food and drink in exchange for your favorite fertility poem.

The yellow bus is decorated with bright red paint and big green letters on the side that read: “AMOR PROHIBIDO.” If

you only knew how our forbidden love permanently changed my relationship with my family, you might have convinced me to leave you. But then there would be no Aria. No Aria. No Aria. No.

Stuck to the windshield in shiny black, reflector letters is “DIOS ESTA CONMIGO.” I wish I could feel God with me now. The truth is that I never understood your faith, not just in God, but in all things.

Almost every commercial vehicle in Guatemala makes some religious claim, even those with “ESTÚPIDO ROMÁNTICO” and “LOVE-MACHINE PLAYBOY” painted on the sides. Was this true twenty years ago? How preposterous that the “VIRGIN MARY” and “SEXY SENSUAL” are stickers on the same bus! Were I a bus, what shiny slogan would be plastered on my windshield for all to see? It would not be “DIOS ME GUÍA.” Perhaps “VIRGEN DEL CAMINO,” because nothing in this life has prepared me for this. I am a virgin to these roads.

On May 10, 1991, I gave birth to Aria Talahi Avery. At forty-one weeks, I was beginning to lose hope that I would ever deliver, especially when everyone was telling me that pregnant doctors often have preterm labor. The contractions began in the middle of the eleven o'clock news. At first they felt like intense stretches. I woke up Dottie, and she was like an expectant parent herself. She ran the bubble bath. I had packed my hospital bag weeks earlier. Dot put on the Chopin impromptus and paged the on-call masseuse with the kind of excitement I imagined only you could have.

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Between contractions, Dot washed my hair and handed me the navy silk pajamas you had ordered for me for Christmas. They were beautiful and elegant, the perfect outfit for laboring. Thank you, my love, for your thoughtfulness to the very end. I still have those pj's. Dot groans every time she sews up another hole in them. The masseuse arrived after all this pre-labor primping. She rocked me back and forth, moving her hands in the direction of the contractions. She massaged my swollen feet, furrowed brow, and tense scalp. She coached me to breathe through the pain. Taxol and Bleo hid beneath the couch, afraid of my deep-throated cries. I was more animal than human.

By the time my water broke and I reached the hospital, I could not imagine going au natural and immediately ordered an epidural. Before the anesthesiologist's arrival, violent waves of pain overtook my body. In the midst of it, I wanted to strangle the masseuse because I could not stand to be touched. Dot tried to excuse her from the room, but it was too late. The poor woman witnessed my outbursts and was so startled that she left without taking her CD of the African Divas. Then retrograde amnesia (the only thing I remember now are those tribal birthing songs), because the next thing I knew, tiny, perfect Aria was lying on my chest, seven pounds, eleven ounces, and twenty inches, Apgar scores to make you proud.

Your absence has been palpable at every moment but especially in those early days. Of course Mamani Joon could

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not be with me either. Maman and Baba chose not to greet their beautiful granddaughter upon her arrival. Nevertheless, there were moments when I felt like the happiest woman alive: I finally had a relative in this country again.

Love,
Jasmine

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Happy sixth birthday, my sweetest of sweetie pies.
Mama misses you and loves you so much.
I promise to find you very, very soon.
P.S. Please give me a hint about where you are.

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May 13, 1997

Dear Alexander,

In Guatemala I have been inducted into your family's cult of corn. The Mayan world revolves around maize with a capital *M*. According to legend, humankind was created from maize. It is the dietary staple but possesses as much spiritual nourishment as physical. It has been a full immersion experience. I breakfast with *tamalitos* (maize dough cooked in maize leaves) and *atol* (maize gruel with generous amounts of sugar and cinnamon). I lunch with tortillas (maize pancakes), wrapped in napkins as warm and snug as a child on a mother's back. I snack with *chuchitos* (tamales stuffed with vegetables and chili pepper) and roasted corn (with lime and salt), and then dine with more tortillas. It is no surprise that Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias won the Nobel Prize for, among other works, *Hombres de maíz* (*Men of Maize*). I, too, am made of maize now.

At the fiesta we obtained the earth's permission before the seeds were sown; I lit candles for you, desperately hoping for your well-being. The villagers burned candles honoring water, animals, and the universe. The planting itself was a community affair. Men, women, and children worked together. Even the elderly participated. Those who were too old for the manual labor served *atol* and tamales, and others told stories to keep spirits high. I carried you with me during the night watch as I chased away the rodents and raccoons hungry to dig up the seeds. Your hands were with me each

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morning, a final parting, as I raked the soil with my fingers, sensing the temperature of the earth, learning to make predictions about the sprouting of the first leaves.

Working the earth in Guatemala, I have imagined you countless times as a child on your farm in Platte, your father coaxing you away from a book to join in the water-setting contests in the days before piped irrigation. You would halfheartedly participate among the mob of family, while your brother would win every season. Your parents would be impressed with my new vocabulary: *tuza*, *xilote*, *mazorca*, *milpa*. Especially since this city girl only just learned her corn anatomy in English last Christmas. They would be thrilled by the sacredness of each tassel, shank, silk, stalk, and ear. I would make them proud, the way I brag about Nebraska being one of the largest producers of maize in the United States.

Why do I persevere on these details when all I want to do is apologize? Oh, Alex, I regret so many things: how I handled that last night with you, terminated communication without explanation, and made you believe that it was possible to continue life as we had known it. Our last night together, I fought like hell to convince myself that the old Jasmine could return, that it was possible to move beyond all that had happened. The next morning I knew it was an illusion.

Please try to proceed with your life. It is better that we cease communication. Know that I have loved you deeply and will forever cherish the memories of our time together.

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It is not surprising that after the worst possible turn of events in my life, I find myself working in the cornfields, as you did in your childhood. I hope you can see this as I do, a celebration of our relationship, a communion on a deep, earthbound level, carrying you within me even as I say good-bye.

Love,
Jasmine

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