Part 1

Sisters

In the time of our history when the Songwriter Who Imagined was murdered in New York and the dictator Saddam invaded Iran, there was a girl who wanted to be as free as a boy in choosing her future. Her father, however, cared only that she marry a suitable young man. Her mother wanted peace all around. Despite his relentless nagging, the daughter refused an audience to any suitors who inquired. Soon it came to pass that the girl's younger sister, who was demure and obedient, and to whom the elder sister was supremely devoted, fell in love with a suitable young man of her own and wanted to marry. The father, recognizing this as an auspicious opportunity, pronounced that he would allow the marriage of his younger daughter only when the elder daughter consented to marry as well. Much to everyone's surprise, the elder daughter swiftly and dispassionately chose the next suitor in line. With great aplomb, the father sent invitations far and wide for a grand double wedding, at which point the elder daughter secretly visited a surgeon and had herself made barren—and therefore unmarriageable. The father, apoplectic with rage and determined not to lose face entirely, allowed the younger daughter to marry, but he disowned the elder one, who happily moved far away to pursue her desires.

Prologue

As a matter of coincidence, the American Embassy hostages were released on the same day that Mitra Jahani had her tubes tied. January 20, 1981. She saw the men on a wall-mounted television screen when she woke up from the surgery. The volume was low, but she heard their hoots and hollers, saw one punch the air in triumph, another one kiss the tarmac at the bottom of the mobile stairs. Fifty-two of them, long-haired and bearded, looking fairly decent for having spent more than a year in the clutches of a group of young Iranian militants. *Either I'm still zoned out and dreaming,* Mitra thought, *or I'm hallucinating.*

Mitra closed her eyes, counted to five, opened them tentatively, and kept her gaze away from the television screen. Here was the top of her hand, covered in a mess of clear tape, sprouting a needle and IV tubing that snaked beyond her peripheral vision. Here was her body covered in a flimsy white hospital blanket, her big feet down there like two molehills. Her other hand, she realized, rested under the blanket on a thick strip of gauzy bandage taped to her lower belly. She turned her head slightly, and here was Olga, sitting next to her like Luca Brasi on a job for the Corleone family.

The caption on the TV screen read: VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE, GERMANY. With an oversize smile, President Jimmy Carter—actually, former President by just a few minutes—was greeting

the hostages for which his administration had finally negotiated a release.

"This is surreal," Mitra muttered.

Olga bolted up from her chair and bent forward. "What you say, Mitra-joon?"

Mitra pointed weakly at the TV, coughed, then winced. Amazing how many stomach muscles were involved in a simple cough.

"You have pain," Olga pronounced anxiously in Farsi. She hurried into the hallway, her rubber-soled orthopedics squeaking on the linoleum. "'Scuse me, 'scuse me! I need nurse here. My girl, she need medicine for pain. You coming now? Now you coming? Please. Right 'way, please! Oh, t'ank you, t'ank you." A pill came to Mitra in a plastic cup. Olga's thick dishpan fingers tilted a glass of water to her lips. She swallowed and let her head fall back against the pillow.

Now the caption read: Hostages Return After 444 Days in Captivity. Okay, she wasn't hallucinating.

"Number four very bad luck," said a voice to Mitra's left. A Chinese woman in the other bed was shaking her head at the screen. "Four-four-four. *Triple* bad luck."

"Ignore her," said Olga in Farsi. "Bad luck is more complicated than one number. Anyway, she is nosy, asking why a young girl such as you had a woman's surgery. She thinks you had an abortion, and she wants to disapprove. You should have a private room."

Mitra smiled thinly at the woman. To Olga, she shrugged and responded in Farsi, "It's only one night." She gestured at the television. "Why aren't you joyful, Olga-joon? No more yellow ribbons or 'Bomb Iran' songs." Mitra thought people would slowly forget the whole miserable crisis. Maybe they'd even revert to thinking of Iran as Persia, an exoticized place whose inhabitants lived in silk tents and rode camels. To think that such ignorance had once pissed her off, that she'd tried to correct people about where her parents originally came from, even to show them a map sometimes. She never thought she'd want that back again, that anonymous heritage.

Olga said, "I do not care anymore about the hostages or the new President Reagan or Iran, may God castrate its mullahs. I am worrying about you, Mitra-joon. How you are and what you have done." She looked away. "How I have helped you do this terrible thing."

Olga knew about operations. Eleven times in her youth she had let the surgeons cut her. Operations to "correct" her. Of no use. She remained infertile. This was what happened when girls were married off at twelve and pregnant by thirteen. A body too small to nurture another body. Death before life. A full-grown baby boy—gray as a dead tree—cut out of her like a useless goiter. The look of her bloated belly still told the story: the first cut—from breast to mound—like a river on a map; the other cuts like silvery moonlit tributaries.

Mitra had said her belly would not look like that. Just a small incision that would fade to a nearly imperceptible line, like a kitten scratch. The golden-haired doctor at the institute in Manhattan had said so, his smile made stupid by the lie Mitra told him about an inheritable disease and by his guilelessness about young women who say they do not ever want children anyway.

Over the last weeks, Olga had begged Mitra: *Don't do this. Run away, just run away.* But Mitra always did what she wanted with the single-mindedness and impatience of a teenage boy with an erection. From the moment Olga set eyes on her at the New Jersey house just over ten years ago, she knew that this girl—then just thirteen years old—was a force: rebellious, stubborn, determined. *Takes one to know one*, Mitra later taught her. Yes, Olga had seen herself in Mitra; herself as she once was.

"Are you hungry?" Olga asked, sitting like a Buddha (America had made her fat), hungry herself, but not wanting to eat.

Mitra shook her head, eyes opening and closing. "No." She blinked slowly. "What time is it?"

"Night."

Mitra's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Go back to the hotel now, Olga-joon. Call Maman at eleven o'clock and tell her that the

show was wonderful and we're safe in the room. You remember the name of the show?"

"The one about the cats."

"*Cats*, that's what it's called. *Cats*. Remember."

Olga nodded and wrung her hands like a murderer about to confess. "I don't want to leave you," she said.

"Tell Maman I'm in the bathroom. Tell her I'm tired and we're going to bed. She won't need to talk to me."

"But you will be alone here."

"Olga," Mitra said sharply. "Have I ever minded being alone?"

Olga jerked her chin up and smacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth: a forthright Persian no.

"Go then," Mitra said. "You have money for the cab, right?"

Olga rose and pulled a crumpled wad of dollars out of her raincoat pocket. "I am going," she said, but she stood still, her vision suddenly blurring.

Mitra smiled through her discomfort. "Don't look like that. Everything is good. I am satisfied."

"You are strong, *azizam*. Too strong."

Mitra shook her head. "No," she said in English. "I'm free."

Chapter 1

September 1998

She came to the East Coast for the first anniversary of her sister's death. It was the Shia way, to mark the Death Day—first at seven days, then at forty, and finally at one year. Not that Mitra was a believer. She came because she felt sorry for her mother, still crestfallen and clutching tightly to the traditions she'd been trying to instill in her two daughters since they were born at Bergen County Hospital. Mitra had fought hardest against those rituals—Persian New Year parties, Zoroastrian festivals, Ramadan fasting—but now Mitra was her mother's only child.

Dawn at Kennedy Airport. Round-edged melamine furniture, miles of burgundy carpet, burnt coffee smell—the air of a banquet hall the morning after a raucous party. A janitor harpooned candy wrappers and dirty napkins from the floor. Mitra heard the drone of a vacuum cleaner as she ordered an espresso from a café cart, then took a seat at the end of a bank of bucket chairs facing the windows. She was in no hurry to escape the boundaries of transit. On the tarmac sat a gaggle of airplanes tinged pink in the daybreak.

From a distance, say, from the point of view of the logy barista who had served her espresso, Mitra looked unapproachable. This was not only because the barista was a young twentysomething and Mitra just over the cusp of forty. Despite her jeans, plain

white shirt, and tight-fitting leather jacket, Mitra exuded the self-assuredness of a power-suited executive. And there was strength in her face: the olive skin, chocolate eyes, long arched eyebrows, and especially the angular nose—not exactly hooked, not exactly humped, but definitely a feature that would have inclined most girls to opt for a slight surgical correction.

Mitra scalded her tongue on the coffee, and her eyes watered. One of the airplanes trembled at the strain of its full-on engines, and she remembered tramping across the tarmac all those years ago in the shadow of her parents, little Anahita clasping her ears and squinting against the noise of the rush of air, while Mitra jumped and giggled in the thrilling vortex of mechanical energy.

Mitra belched softly, rubbed two fingers over the heartburn behind her sternum. Espresso and anxiety—well behaved on their own, rambunctious as urchins together. She dropped her coffee into a trash can. Transit was just another word for limbo, and there was no such place. Except maybe death.

She got up, kicked her carry-on to a wheel-perfect slant, and made her way toward the moving walkway. Nearing the edge of transit, she quickened her pace, focused on the resolute *clip-clop* of her heels on the terminal's stone floor and on a faraway Exit sign, not once eyeballing the small crowd of impatient, neck-craning welcomers straining at the stanchions and barrier ropes. And yet, she caught a whiff of Anahita's Chanel No. 9, a glimpse of little Nina's pink hair ribbons, a snatch of Nikku's pubescent belly laugh. Phantom memories. The car crash had taken all three of them—sister, niece, nephew.

At baggage claim, Mitra stepped outside and bummed a cigarette from an oily-haired businessman with a French accent. She hadn't smoked in fifteen years.

The rental car was appliance white. A Ford something. Itchy seats. Bad radio. Mitra's mother had offered to pick her up, but Mitra said it was too early in the morning. The truth was, Shireen was a terrible driver, the kind who kept the steering wheel in con-

stant motion as if the mechanism needed second-by-second readjustment, who overcompensated on every turn and used the brake pedal like a pogo stick. It never occurred to her to wonder why her daughters got carsick only when she was at the wheel.

Mitra adjusted the seat to accommodate her lower back, which ached from transplanting a manzanita bush in her yard the day before. The September sun splashed onto the parking lot, making the concrete shimmer. She dug into her purse for her sunglasses. The air already felt humid, and she longed for the cool fog of San Francisco.

She merged into rush-hour traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway. She hoped it would take her a long time to get to New Jersey; it was hours before she was scheduled to pick her mother up for lunch. She could first drop her luggage off at her cousin Nezam's apartment in Manhattan, where she would be staying, but she felt too sluggish to deal with his five-year-old twin boys. Besides a short, openmouthed nap on the flight, Mitra hadn't slept. She was a bit numb, as if only half of her had landed in New York. She tuned in to the NPR station and was struck, as always, by the flood of news and commentary on the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair, its salacious details gravely analyzed by politicos and journalists while they ignored the massacres in Kosovo, the embassy bombings in Africa, and the Rwandan genocide trial.

In the Holland Tunnel, Mitra was ready when the memory of Anahita came to her. They were children in the back seat of her father's Cadillac, the tunnel like the inside of an animal's throat, yellow beams of light sweeping and flickering over their party dresses and lace-ruffled anklets, Anahita moving her rose-petal lips in silent child-prayer to keep the Hudson River from crushing them, and Mitra leaning over to whisper in her ear, *Omigod! I just saw a leak!*

The wicked memories; wicked because Mitra had been wicked in those early years. Until later when Anahita was Sweet Ana, red-licorice-smelling and cheeks like cool pillows and eyes that said

tell me what to do—baby sister, unlucky sister; breakable to break Mitra's heart. Anahita, who wanted and needed everything Mitra did not.

Despite the traffic, Mitra arrived at the turnoff for Devon in an hour. The vehicle seemed to know its way: past the golf course at the country club where her father used to play tennis (trees hinting at the gold and red of autumn), through the condominium development that had caused such a ruckus when her father's company built it ten years before, over the plank bridge (now reinforced with steel), past the grammar school where Bobbie Dowd had thrown a rock at her forehead from the top of the jungle gym and Nancy Goldberg had lost a chunk of her red hair in Mitra's fist, and then into the town of Devon, named for the dairy cows, lowing ghosts now.

Three days short of a year ago, Nezam had driven Mitra here from the airport. Her brain had registered nothing of her surroundings; she'd felt numb since the phone call came that her sister was in serious condition from a car accident. Anahita and the children were already dead, of course, but this was the Jahani family way. News of death was not imparted over the phone, in a letter, or even in person, until it was absolutely necessary, like on your way to the morgue. To take this tack was thought of as being sensitive, being careful not to shock the person, but that night when Nezam turned the car, not into the hospital's parking lot but the mortuary's, Mitra grabbed the collar of his jacket, yanked and shook, and screamed *Coward!* over and over. Poor guy, he was as devastated as she. No. He was better off; everyone was. Only Mitra knew the accident might have been prevented. Worse, that she might have caused it. She and a man she'd never met.

There were no empty spaces in front of the Starbucks, which had obliterated the Dairy Queen two years before. The main drag of downtown Devon still boasted a kosher deli and Kleinfeld's Fine Jewelry, but where the Woolworth's used to be was a market that advertised fresh eel and Korean videos—a testament to the influx of Asian immigrants. There was a different nail salon every

two or three stores, each offering mani-pedis at bargain prices. In every one, Mitra saw the ghost of her sister, hands and feet stretched out for painting.

She parked in one of the diagonal spaces next to the train tracks. Even when she was a child, no trains came through here; the tracks had been left intact to lend a certain small-town quaintness to Devon. The old stone station was now Café Buon Gusto! Like so many suburban cafés, it was a restaurant, not a place where you could drop in for coffee, a pastry, and the newspaper.

Mitra crossed the street, reminding herself with pleasure that jaywalking was generally ignored on the East Coast, and headed toward what used to be the corner candy store, where her father had forbidden them to go *because only bad American children hang out there*. Inside, it had been close and hot all year-round, the floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with useless but gotta-have items that suburban children spent their allowances on: baseball cards, glitter, fake mustaches, comic books, spinning tops, Mouseketeer hats, warm Pepsi in a glass bottle. Mitra had never liked candy, but that hadn't prevented her from stealing a great many jawbreakers from the grizzled owner and his dwarfish wife, standing guard behind a peeling Formica counter no bigger than a foot square.

As Mitra went into the store now, two crimson-lipped matrons stepped around her, accents Jersey-nasal, a plethora of tinny *t*'s and yawning *i*'s. The store had a bright and roomy 7-Eleven look, with a smiling Bengali clerk behind the counter ("Register has no more than $30 cash"). Mitra averted her eyes from the shelves of primary-color candy and snacks (*Skittles!* Nina squealed in her ear) and from a small toy section where she'd once bought Nikku a balsa airplane. She walked swiftly to the tall counter and asked for a pack of American Spirit Blues, forked over the bills, and was glad to find herself back on Main Street.

She craved a latte but headed toward Devon's vintage diner, a Sterling Streamliner that she wished someone would restore. Two cops sat at the counter, hunched, silent, ignoring the squawk of the radios weighing down their belts. The lone waitress, reddish-

gray hair twisted into a small tire on the back of her head, refilled their mugs. Mitra slid into a booth.

She remembered the waitress. Tammy. That was her name. Her hair had been copper red back then, and Ana was mesmerized by it. "I bet it's down to her knees," she'd said. The bulbous configurations Tammy sculpted on the back of her head had run the gamut from donuts (several à la Jo Anne Worley) to stiff ringlets the size of Slinkies.

"Who cares?" Mitra had said.

"Why doesn't she ever wear it down?"

"Because, stupid, it's against the law."

Eyes wide. "Why?"

"She's serving food. She has to wear it up so it doesn't get in the food."

"Oh."

Their mother used to drop them off at the diner sometimes when she had errands to run, order them a banana split to share. Mitra wouldn't let Ana touch the chocolate ice cream, would shove the nuts onto Ana's side of the bowl, even though Ana hated the nuts as much as she did and painstakingly ate around them. The waitress had always been nicer to Ana and had once brought her a scoop of chocolate in a little dish. Mitra was livid, and she quickly drummed up a story: *Chocolate is more fattening than vanilla or strawberry, so chubby kids like you shouldn't eat it.*

Tammy served Mitra a cup of coffee that tasted like a blend of instant and yesterday's grounds. Mitra looked at her watch: eight thirty. Time was not flying. She thought about reading the paper and glanced at a much-fingered tabloid sitting on a stool across the aisle. *STAINED!* it shouted, referring to Monica Lewinsky's dress. She shook her head slowly and realized with sudden disgust that it was a gesture her father made when he was feeling contemptuous, which was often. She clenched her jaw. Being back meant she would have to deal with him.

She contemplated the sticky menu. She could order some eggs,

even pancakes. *Why don't you ever get fat, Mitti?* Her finger grazed a rip in the vinyl cushion next to her. She looked down. A long slit and yellow stuffing. *I'll sit on the rip, Mitti. You sit on the other side.* Short, pudgy legs, white sandals dangling inches above the speckled floor.

Mitra left a five for the one-dollar coffee. On the way out, she leaned across the counter to Tammy. "Your hair's beautiful. Do you mind me asking how long it is?"

"Just under my braw strap now," Tammy said, eyes gleaming to life. "Used to be down to the backsamy knees, hon, but that was a lawng time ago."

Downtown Devon was too small. And flat. Going for a walk in San Francisco was an aerobic workout no matter how leisurely you strolled. Mitra got back into the car and reached for her phone, stopped herself before dialing Julian. She didn't want to wake him; he'd been on call last night. She imagined him taking up the whole of her bed, half of his face on her pillow, his long legs spread to the bottom corners. It wasn't that she missed him really, she just craved the whispery baritone of his voice, the slur of his British accent. It might help her to step back from the gray swirl of Devon before it sucked her in, but she dropped the phone back into her purse.

She drove out of town, up the long hill the school bus used to take, and veered off into a neighborhood of houses on one-acre plots. Many had been renovated, but they bore the remnants of the extra-tall double-entry doors and wrought-iron railings of midcentury fashion. She took several streets—left, right, down, around—driving by rote the way she applied lip gloss without a mirror. She parked and walked, stepping over cracks and avoiding potholes that had grown wider and deeper but remained childhood markers. At the edge of the school playground was a bench she didn't remember. She sat and closed her eyes, let the sun hit her face.

Anahita had been three years behind Mitra in school. The first day of third grade—Ana's first day of kindergarten—Ana ducked under Miss Callahan's outstretched arm, ran straight for the third-grade class lining up in the hallway, and tried to hug her sister. Mitra gritted her teeth and pushed Ana away. "Go back to your class!" And later, on the school bus: "You sit in the front and I sit in the back. And don't come up to me at school!"

Anahita had obeyed, as she always did. Not once after the first day did she look toward Mitra. Not when she was teased and taunted for her frizzy hair, not even when she broke her arm falling from the slide. Not until Ana was twelve, when suddenly everything changed between them, when it was too late for Mitra to expunge those callous acts, at least not in her own mind.

Mitra startled as the gymnasium door burst open and regurgitated a gaggle of exuberant children. She stood, gathered her purse, and noticed a metal plaque screwed into a lower slat of the bench:

Nikku & Nina—Gone Too Soon

Eyes stinging, careful not to stumble, she headed for the car.

The old residential part of Devon had experienced a madness of boomer remodeling, what Mitra thought of as a reawakening of postwar nuclear family idealism. She made a K-turn and parked across the street from the bungalow Anahita and her husband once owned. After the accident, Bijan had taken a month's leave of absence from his bank job, spending most of it in bed reacquainting himself with his collection of bongs. The bank had finally honored his request for a transfer to their London office. Mitra had spoken to him once before he departed, a short conversation that left her feeling cold. She knew they might not talk again for a long while; he couldn't bear it. She missed him now, especially his Jimmy Stewart stutter and his dry jokes about impotent bankers.

She opened the window and lit a cigarette, promising herself

to drive off when she finished it. A breeze whisked the smoke out the window. Sun glinted off the side mirror. She lifted her gaze to study the house.

Same, same—only different. Anahita would notice the film of dust on the black shutters and the faint brown spots on the lawn. She would hate that the wooden screen door had been replaced by a cheap metal one, that the front porch where she'd had Adirondack chairs and hanging plants was now a parking spot for two adult bicycles and a half-dead, left-leaning ficus.

Did the new owners know the sad story of their predecessors? They must, Mitra decided. Neighborhoods owned the tragedies of their inhabitants. The new people were no doubt solid American white people, not immigrants like her parents who weighed every story for bad luck—and bought a different house.

Mitra turned the car off to hear suburbia: a distant lawnmower, barking dogs, a woodpecker knocking itself out on a telephone pole, the faraway chatter and laughter of the playground—sounds of her childhood, sounds Anahita loved and Mitra hated.

She broke her promise and lit another cigarette from the butt of the first one. Anahita would have scolded her; she'd never smoked, never done anything their parents would have disapproved of. Mitra's opposite.

A maroon minivan pulled into Anahita's ex-driveway, and a young woman in gray sweats jumped out, opened the back door, and reached in to tug a towheaded toddler out of the car. The child wore a pink sundress and white sandals. Mitra saw, even though she was too far away to see, each of the child's pink toes with their moon-shaped nail beds and pliant white cuticles. Her throat swelled. She turned the key in the ignition, turned it again, and the mechanism grated. With a jolt, she drove off.

She'd been holding her breath, it seemed. She was on the shoulder next to the golf course. Gasping, she inhaled the odor of freshcut grass and fertilizer. The digital clock on the dash read 9:15. She cursed herself for avoiding Libby and Nezam's apartment; she could have dropped her luggage off, taken a shower, skipped the

tour of Devon altogether. A year goes by and you think you're strong, and then you're not. She rummaged for her cell phone and dialed her mother's number.

"Hello," he said.

Stunned at the sound of the wrong voice, Mitra's clenched her jaw. She couldn't remember her father ever leaving for the office later than eight thirty. Then again, it had been eighteen years since she'd been witness to his schedule.

She swallowed dryly. "Hello, Baba."

Silence. Would he hang up?

Go ahead, Mitra thought, *hang up*.

And he did.

Chapter 2

His hand tingled from slamming the receiver into its cradle. A chip of plastic had flown off the machine and been swallowed by the nap of the bedroom carpet. The one morning Yusef Jahani had slept in, had not set his alarm for 6:00 a.m., and had indulged in the sight of the news anchor's sleek legs while he looped the ends of his silk tie, was the one morning that the telephone rang at 9:15 and his wife was not the only person home to answer.

He shouted into the hallway: "That was your daughter!" But Shireen was already down in the kitchen. Scowling, he donned his suit jacket in one swift motion, snapped on his gold watch, swept up his briefcase, and descended the stairs at an age-defying clip.

"That was your daughter," he barked across the kitchen at his wife's back.

"Oh!" She pivoted from the sink, an eager smile lighting up her raccoon-eyed face. He glanced at the table—an omelet, warmed lavash bread, feta cheese, honeycomb, waiting for him. Shireen's smile evaporated, her mouth twitching with remorse. "Yusef-joon," she pleaded. "I'm sure she thought you were at the office."

"Thanks to you, Shireen, I am not."

She took a tentative step forward, wiping wet hands on her apron. "Did you speak to her?"

He snorted, shook his head in disgust, and strode for the door

that led to the garage. The woman was impossible. After all these years, she still held out hope that he would reconcile with their diabolical daughter. How had he tolerated such a simpleminded woman for more than four decades? He slid into the tumescent seat of his Jaguar. She appeared at the door then, her hand raised timidly for him to "wait" or "stop" or "please," and he put the car in gear, watched her worried features grow dimmer as he backed out into the sunlight, and exhaled with satisfaction as he pressed the button to close the garage door, making her disappear.

She deserved it, he thought, coming to a brief stop at the bottom of the driveway, then turning leisurely in front of a car that was, he felt, traveling far too speedily, driven by a pimply-faced teenager. This was what happened when a man spoke to his wife about business matters. Last night he'd been more irritated than usual, and he'd made the mistake of complaining about a young Irish painting crew who had stolen the Westchester project's only fourteen-foot ladder. Instead of merely listening, she started in with her pampering: *Oh, but, Yusef-joon, you've worked like so hard all of your life and now is the time for you to rest a little.* He reminded her that he was never going to be like an American husband who spent his final years grazing on a golf course. *At least go in a little later to the office, Yusef-joon. You deserve it.* Right. Her suggestions were always idiotic. Furthermore, if Shireen were a properly loyal wife, she would not be speaking to Mitra either. She was lucky he hadn't forbidden it over the years. But what did he get for being nice? Disrespect, that's what. And that gleeful look on her face when she heard that Mitra had called—aah!

He glanced in the rearview mirror. Why, the pimply-faced punk was tailgating him! Not only that, the boy was craning forward, scowling, and giving him the middle finger. Yusef snorted and put his foot on the brake. At the busy Pilgrim Avenue intersection, he stopped and waited for a school bus to lumber up the hill before turning, which allowed him a few moments to gaze appreciatively at the condominium complex he had built, with its brick veneer,

white Georgian columns, and double-story sunburst windows. The yuppies had bought them all.

On the main road, the school bus flashed its lights and slowed to take on a group of children. Yusef peeked into the rearview mirror and chuckled at the teenager's angry contortions. When he looked back at the bus, a glint of pink caught his eye: a shiny backpack, the likes of which he remembered well, on the back of a little girl with dark silky hair so familiar to him that he could feel the strands slipping like bird's feathers through his fingers. His throat constricted. He would never again experience that. This was how the ghosts of his lost grandchildren came to him—suddenly. An ambush, an attack, a weakening of his bladder. A gasp filled his chest. And then the life of his precious Anahita unfolded before him . . . the tiny baby who gripped his finger for however long he held her, the chubby toddler who crawled into his lap to feed him a rice cookie, the girl whose delicate feet walked on his back, whose dark eyes gleamed when he came home at the end of the day, the woman who never challenged him, always respected him, and who gave him those beautiful grandchildren.

The school bus extinguished its red light, and a plume of gray exhaust ballooned from its tailpipe. Yusef pulled the Jag onto the narrow shoulder. He didn't notice the triumphant fist of the tormented teenager thrust like a periscope above the car as it passed. His eyes were fixed on the back window of the school bus, looking for another glimpse of pink.

The spell began to pass in less than a minute, which was as long as it took him to dial his office. "Any messages?" he demanded when his secretary answered.

"Good morning, Mr. J."

He sighed. Vivian would not give him his messages until he returned her greeting. It was impertinent, but she'd been with him for thirty years; more important, she had the sharp mind and quick skills of a master bookkeeper but required only the salary of—what did they call it these days?—an administrative assistant.

"Good morning, Vivian," said Yusef. "Any messages?"

"No messages, Mr. J."

"Did you track down those punk painters?"

"No such address, Mr. J. The phone number's wrong too. It's a pizza place in the Bronx."

He slapped the steering wheel with his palm. "I will be there in fifteen minutes." He hung up, peered into the side mirror, and peeled out, raising a cloud of gravel. He was himself again.

As far back as anyone remembered, the Jahani patriarchs were landowners. Khans, they were called, gentry. Even after the Shah's White Revolution in the 1960s when massive plots of private land were distributed to the tenants of these khans, the Jahanis continued to profit from land-related projects. And now, in America, it was the same, though not as filthy lucrative as it had been in Iran. Over the years, Yusef had slowly bought up land with an intuition for how the suburbs would grow and sprawl, and with an imagination that saw housing tracts, apartment buildings, and strip malls where forests and dairy farms had once been.

Yusef pulled into his usual parking space and hung his illegally procured handicapped tag from the rearview mirror. The Jahani family offices occupied the fourth and top floor of a stucco building fashioned in a faux Mediterranean style—teal-colored trim, arched portico, and pathways of tessellated pavers. The building was flanked by two twenty-story 1960s brick apartment houses, their air-conditioning units sticking out like tongues dripping saliva. Yusef rather liked the apartment houses, had in fact considered purchasing them, evicting their fixed-income widows and bubblegum-chewing single mothers, and converting the units into condominiums. But Nezam, his sister-in-law's son, who now took care of the legal department, talked him out of it. "It's not worth the hassle with the city or the bad publicity," he'd said. "Besides, the buildings are ugly, Uncle." This new male generation, Yusef thought, with its power-bar lunches, vibrating pocket gadgets, and diaper-changing skills, had no sense of architectural

aesthetics. Sourly, he recalled how he'd allowed Nezam and the others to persuade him on the Mediterranean design of this, his own building, when he'd wanted to erect an elegant glass rectangle evocative of the Hancock Building in Boston. It had been one of his weak moments.

The "others" were the twelve or fifteen (he could never remember exactly) boy children of his various half siblings and relatives who had fled the Islamic Revolution in 1979 with little more than the clothing in their Louis Vuitton luggage and the jewels hidden in the heels of their wives' shoes. Suddenly, the America he'd thought of as his alone, where he played gracious host to visiting kin, transformed into a melting pot for his extended family. Some of them, thank God, had moved to Los Angeles, where they marinated in a false revival of the bourgeois decades before the fall of the Shah. But the others had, to their credit, obsessed over the education of their children, sent them to Ivy League schools, and proffered them up to Yusef. He took them, of course. He'd shown his family the benevolence that their common patriarch had never shown him.

Pressing the elevator button, he chuckled slightly. Who would have imagined that he—son of a minor wife, orphan of a madwoman, ignored burden-child—would end up being the family patriarch? As the metal door slid open to admit him, Yusef smiled. Just for a moment.

As soon as Vivian heard the familiar click of Mr. J's heels in the hallway outside the elevator, she beelined it to the galley kitchen to pour his glass of tea. By the time he made it past the marble reception area, with its faux-painted wall of a Persian rose garden, and wove his way through the maze of office cubicles (acknowledging no one), she was stepping carefully, silver tray in hand, past the gargantuan blueprint copier, conference room, restrooms, and her own office, where she quickly grabbed her steno pad and skittered out to fall in behind her boss into his corner office.

The immense space was suggestive of an outmoded hotel suite;

lots of chrome and tweedy orange fabrics, a sitting area with a long velour sofa and wet bar, a glass desk as large as a twin-size mattress. His employees called it the Retro Room.

He placed his briefcase on the desk, clicked it open, removed a pile of papers, and turned to unlock one of a bank of oak cabinets behind his black leather executive swivel chair. Vivian laid his tea to the left of the blotter and took a seat on the other side of the desk, her pen poised over the steno pad.

"Where is Nezam?" he asked, his back still to her.

"At the project upstate," she said. "Something about a failed electrical inspection in the kitchens."

"And Kareem?"

"In Westchester at the Tarrytown building."

"What is he doing there? Ali One and Ali Two are responsible for that."

"He didn't say, Mr. J."

"Did he leave me a copy of the punch list on the Bergen duplex?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but I can ask Jane."

He turned. "Jane? Who's Jane?"

She paused slightly. She'd introduced them several times, but he never remembered the flat-chested ones. "A new secretary."

He reached for the tray, popped a lump of sugar in his mouth, and slurped at his tea. Vivian could never get used to the sound; in her house, food noises were bad manners. Over the years, she'd learned to accept some of Mr. J's incongruities, his "immigrant ways"—an afternoon nap on his sofa, slimy discarded sunflower seed shells in his ashtray, the waft of enough cologne to hide the odor of a postgame football team, and the fact that he never used his wife's name. After all, no matter how long a person lived in the United States, there were bound to be certain things they were incapable of assimilating. Her Scottish mother had never been able to look at a banana as anything less than a prize. And her neighbor from Bombay, a computer engineer, had been blowing his snot into the flower beds for fifteen years. It took a generation

for people to become true Americans. Mr. J's kids were a perfect example. Correction: Mr. J's kid. Vivian cringed as if she'd made the mistake aloud. Why couldn't she go through a day without thinking about Anahita? He never mentioned it, but she was sure he grieved. What parent wouldn't? Sheri in the billing department, who'd been with the company for ten years, thought Mr. J was made out of concrete. *Not one tear at the funeral*, she often reminded Vivian. *He even smiled and thanked the rich suits for coming.* Sheri could say what she wanted; Vivian understood stoicism. Besides, this was the man who had paid for her husband's kidney transplant.

Yusef topped off his tea and leaned back into the desk chair. "Get Kareem on the phone and tell him I want the punch list on my desk by this afternoon. Have Nezam report to me as soon as he gets in. Take a letter." Vivian flipped to a fresh page in her steno pad. "*Attention: Mr. Francis Fogarty, Fogarty Investments*—send it to his home address, Vivian." She nodded. "*Dear Frank, It was a pleasure to run into you and* . . . uh—find out the wife's name—*last weekend at the country club*, period, new paragraph. *As per our conversation, I am very interested*—correction, *I am* extremely *interested in viewing your family property in Maryland*, period. *While the market in the area is very depressed, a rural property is something my wife and I are considering for our retirement*, comma, *a place for our family to gather*, period, new paragraph. *Please call me at your convenience so we may arrange a meeting*—period. *Looking forward*, et cetera. *Sincerely*, et cetera."

"Would you like this on your personal letterhead, Mr. J?"

"Yes, the Joseph Jahani one. And tell Pirooz to research the demographics of Cambridge, Maryland, with the idea of putting a golf resort on that property."

"Pirooz isn't in today, Mr. J. His wife had the baby last night."

"He's taking the whole day off?"

"I believe so."

Yusef shook his head disapprovingly. "What did they have, then?" he asked.

"A boy. Ali."

He sighed. "Jesus. Another Ali." He dismissed Vivian with two fingers and reached for the *Wall Street Journal*.

Vivian sighed and slipped her shoes off under her desk. Her boss was particularly antsy this morning, and she knew it was because Mitra had come to town. There was nothing more irritating to him than his eldest daughter. She propped her bunioned feet on the extra chair, the one her part-time clerk used, the one a teenaged Mitra had used twenty years ago when she worked at the office during the summers. She'd often sneaked away from the reception desk to peer over Vivian's shoulder at the ledgers and to complain about her father, imitating his accent and mannerisms so perfectly that Vivian dissolved into paroxysms of laughter. Once, she took Vivian's eyebrow pencil and drew herself a thin mustache so she could better act the role; stiffening her back, expanding her chest, pointing a finger in the air, she delivered a speech on the merits of stenography according to her father: *Eighty vords a meenute; a girl is vorth nossing widout dat. Vhat happens if your husband loses his job? Eighty vords a meenute and polite phone answering vill save you*.

That girl had no fear of the man; and the other one—Anahita—all she had was fear. She'd worked at the office only one summer, answering phones in the sweetest way, tolerating every snobby secretary who called and every brash salesperson who walked through the main door, in a way that made her father proud. But being perfect took its toll, and Vivian had found Ana sniffling in the restroom several times. Mitra, on the other hand, had once told a flirtatious union official that if he didn't smell like a sewer in ninety-degree weather, she might consider thanking him for staring so blatantly at her breasts. Another time, Mitra told the mayor's secretary—a consistently rude person—to call after her PMS was over. She would beg anyone to take her place at the reception desk so she could prowl the firm's nooks and

crannies; examining blueprints and schematics; shuffling through bidding contracts; memorizing the names of floor tile samples, concrete textures, and roofing material. On her lunch break, she often persuaded one of the general contractors to take her along to walk a project; she kept a yellow hard hat and work boots in the trunk of her Fiat Spider. Once in a while, she sidled her way into the conference room, sat in a corner to listen as her father and the subcontractors battled with the architects over how to bring their designs in line with the reality of costs. He allowed this only because he didn't want to risk her sassing him in front of the other men, but the rest of the time, he went out of his way to speak down to her, show her how inconsequential she was; he was determined to break her spirit, or at least to mold it into one of a conventional girl, a fifties throwback, like her mother. But she was unfazed. She kept coming back every summer, and sometimes after school if she wanted to learn the details of a new project. Mr. J wouldn't let himself see how involved she was, how she could have been his natural successor, far more capable than any of the boys who came later, some of whom were a drag on the business, but secure in their jobs because they were family and, of course, male.

Vivian poured a fresh cup of coffee from her thermos into her #1 Grandma mug. She'd grown old in this office, watching the Jahani soap opera, at first envious of their money and then buoyed about her own simple life as their tragedies piled up. The Revolution in Iran came first, the losses from it—notably the confiscation of the Italianate mansion whose enlarged framed photograph hung on the wall in the conference room; apparently, it had been turned into a sanitarium—and the dubious gains: men, women, and children without a country. She couldn't deny that Mr. J and his wife had risen to the occasion, helped find homes for the displaced, doctors for the traumatized. And when they came, those cousins and uncles and in-laws, it was hardest on Mitra, who was no longer the only eager disciple in the office

and found her place as self-appointed apprentice to the contractors, the subs, and the architects quickly usurped by foreigners. But Vivian had to hand it to the girl; she'd found a solution, she was her father's daughter. First she went to his rival in Manhattan, Manny Hourian—"the Filthy Armenian," as Mr. J called him, though Vivian had heard only good things about the man, who wasn't an immigrant at all, and had been in the business since his grandfather started it a century before—and learned everything she could there. Then, halfway through her graduate studies in architecture, there had been a terrible fight between father and daughter, in his corner office no less, one day seventeen years ago when Vivian was out with the flu. No one heard what was said, but when the two emerged, the look of rage on his face and of determination on hers left little to the imagination: those two might never talk again. Which was exactly what had happened.

Over the years, Mitra had called Vivian once in a while from San Francisco or when she was in town visiting, and they'd chatted about this and that, mostly personal stuff like Tom and his kidney problems; in fact, it had been Mitra who urged Vivian to talk to Mr. J. about helping pay for her husband's transplant. *There are some things he's soft on*, she'd said. *Sick people is one of them*. Vivian knew that Mitra had started her own design and construction business in California (forgoing graduate school), that she'd bought a little run-down house, renovated it, and sold it for a profit, only to do it again and again. She didn't know if Mitra was wealthy now—the girl wasn't the type to brag about that sort of thing—but she assumed she was doing all right.

The click of the intercom came through the phone speaker. Vivian picked up the receiver and pressed the blinking button. "Yes, Mr. J?"

"Call my wife, Vivian. Tell her I have an early-morning meeting in Manhattan and I'll be staying at the St. Regis tonight."

"Yes, Mr. J."

Vivian began dialing Mrs. J.'s number but decided to wait until

afternoon when she knew Mrs. J would be out with Mitra; then she could leave a message on the answering machine, avoid telling the lie in real time. Unaware that her lip was curling, she wondered if her boss had found a new girl or if he was still balling the blond word-processing temp from two months before.