

CHAPTER ONE

The Day Of

A hundred suns may rise, and blaze

four score-four moons may shine;

I vow, without Beloved mine

I am in darkest night.

(Shah Jo Risalo, Heaven, Chapter I-3)

Elyas

At the hospital, nurses and doctors descend on us. Trading medical jargon like relay racers they wheel Malik through doors I'm not allowed to cross. No one is paying me much attention so I find a chair. My head is heavy and my left ear has a distant ringing sound in it.

After a while a nurse wearing comfortable shoes spots me. She must be around my mother's age. "Have you had your head looked at?" she asks.

I shake my head, then groan. My head feels like it's made of lead.

She takes me through a door into a large area full of hospital beds. I climb one of them, lay down and close my eyes.

"Nasty cut you've got there," she says looking at my head.

Grabbing a bottle off a cart she soaks a cotton ball in it and starts to clean my cut. It stings.

"How'd you get it?"

That's when it occurs to me. *Oh no*. I sit up suddenly and the world tilts dangerously.

“Malik,” I say.

The nurse puts her hand on my shoulder. “Easy. You should lie down. Who’s Malik?”

I give in and lay back down but continue to talk. “Malik was in the car with me. Where is he? Is he okay?”

“Is that the young man they brought in a while ago? He went into surgery.”

Surgery? At first I don’t get it. Then it comes to me. *Surgery from the... accident we were in.*

“What’s your name?” the nurse asks me.

“Elyas.”

“You’re going to need stitches, Elyas. Do you feel pain anywhere else? What about a headache or dizziness?”

“Little dizzy.”

“Lie back down then. I’m going to get a doctor to check you out, make sure everything’s okay. They might want to keep you here overnight for observation. You might have a concussion.”

I do as she says. Then something occurs to me. “Mariam must be worried.”

“Who’s Mariam?”

“Malik’s wife. Someone needs to inform her that her husband is in surgery.”

I look through my pockets and find my phone. It looks alright but it won’t turn on. “I think I’m out of charge.”

“I’ll put it on charge at the desk when I’m done here,” the nurse offers. I blink at her. *Why is she being so nice? I’ve been in hospitals before even if I’ve never been to the emergency room. Is this normal?*

The nurse is now threading a wire through a needle. I try not to look.

“Do you know her number? Your friend’s wife?” she asks.

It takes me a second to process who she means. *My friend’s wife*. “Not by heart. It’s saved in my phone.”

“Well, if your friend’s phone was in his pocket, it would be in the hospital with his personal effects. I’ll try and locate it to call his wife, if it’s still on. Unless you would like to?”

My stomach feels hollow at the thought of calling Mariam to tell her about this. Because I am a coward I tell her I’d rather she made the call and then close my eyes.

When I wake up after a few minutes - or maybe hours - I go through the ER into the large waiting area. The only people are an old woman sitting on a chair and a pretty girl leaning against the wall. At first I think the girl is Bahareh and I freeze. But then I look again and see that she looks nothing like my ex-girlfriend.

I spot the nurses’ station, where the nurse who looked after me sits clacking away in front of a computer. Her name tag says her family name is Rahnama.

"My friend Malik. Do you know what's happening with him?" I ask her when she looks up.

“Sorry *azizam*, I just know he's still in surgery. But a doctor should be out to update you and the family. You should be lying down, you know."

A while. Sounds like one of those things officials here use to denote anything between a few minutes to a few days.

“Did you get through to Mariam?” I ask her, but then as if on cue Mariam appears at the top of the stairs. Her eyes are wild and my throat feels too dry to swallow. Something’s funny about her coat, as if she’s buttoned it wrong; I don’t know why I notice. As my gaze travels

downward I see she's wearing two different socks. She's half-walking, half-running to the nurse's station, and then her eyes find me.

Her face is an open book like always. I watch as she goes from worry to surprise and lands on to partial understanding as her eyes take in the bandage on my head. There is something I cannot place - relief? - followed by self-consciousness as she fixes her scarf, which she may or may not be wearing inside out.

"Elyas...?" her eyes are giant question marks.

The nurse didn't tell her. "I...was there," I say lamely. I am winning all kinds of awards in cowardice tonight. Probably reserved myself a special seat on the Hell Express. I am reminded of an English expression we studied in language class years ago: 'stomach in knots'.

"Where is Malik? All they would tell me is that he's in the hospital. Is he okay?" Mariam's words come out rushed. Her accent is pronounced, flattening all of her words.

Nurse Rahnama seems to be good at sensing stomach knots. She comes out from behind the station and leads Mariam to a chair.

"I'm the one that called you, *aziz*. They took your husband into surgery and we're waiting for updates. Why don't I get you some water while you sit and fill out some forms? I need some information from you, like whether you have insurance..."

Mariam looks at her blankly, and I feel a surge of exasperation. *Can't the forms wait?* But I know we're lucky. By some miracle the hospital isn't crowded, and Rahnama doesn't have a hundred people and their families to answer to. This is a government hospital. It could be a lot worse.

Mariam finally sits in the chair opposite mine and takes the forms Rahnama brings her. She looks around uncertainly; she has probably never been here. I finally meet her eye.

“Elyas, what happened?” She asks the simple question I have been dreading all night.

“I don’t...remember much.” I clear my throat of the goddamn golf ball that seems to have stuck in there. All I know is we were in an accident because that’s what they told me...”

“In your car?” It sounds like an accusation, especially after what she says next. “Were you driving?”

“I...must have been.”

“Where were you going?”

“I can’t remember.” Saying this out loud makes it real.

Mariam frowns. “Malik told me he was going to the university, I think.”

Nurse Rahnama comes and sits on the chair next to me. “It’s quite normal to not remember much right after a trauma, especially to the head. It’ll come to you. And now, you really should be in bed.”

She leads me back into the emergency room and I follow. Drawing aside the curtains on my bed completely I can see part of the waiting area, where Mariam sits near the OR doors.

Nurse Rahnama starts to leave, then turns to me. "Have you called your parents? They might worry".

I look at my watch to see it has stopped. “What time is it?”

“It’s 11.”

“At night?!”

“Yes.”

How long was I out for? Maman must be frantic. I must have at least 15 missed on my dead phone right about now.

“Here,” she hands me her phone. “Call your family.”

I take it gratefully, dialling my mother's phone number, and think nurse Rahnama must be one of the last good people left on earth.

When I hang up, a police officer in pale green uniform and a dark pea cap stands in front of me. He holds a notebook in one hand and wears his reading glasses low on his nose. His beard looks like he goes to the barber at least every other day. I can see little grey hairs beginning to emerge, though.

“Are you Mr. Zamani?”

I stare at him stupidly like he is asking me the square root of pi. Then I nod slowly.

“Can you tell me your full name and your national ID?”

I take out my ID from my wallet and hand it to him. He notes it down in his notebook.

“We're here because of the accident you were in. You were driving the car?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

“Do you know the young man in the OR?”

“He's...my friend's husband.”

“Can you tell me his full name?”

“Malik. Malik Shah.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I don't really remember much. I must have been driving because we were in my car.” I'm starting to sound like a broken record.

He looks at me over his glasses. “I am told you need to be under observation tonight. But as soon as you're released from the hospital you need to be at the courthouse for a session with the *bazpors*. You should get a text from *samane sana* with your date, time, and courtroom. Make sure you watch out for the message.”

Mariam

I watch Elyas and Mrs. Zamani talking in low tones to each other. Beyond the occasional word I cannot hear them, just as I could not hear the brief conversation between Elyas and the police officer. It has struck me since I moved here that in casual conversation Iranians talk in a low tone of voice, and not just the women. They can get heated pretty quickly in an argument though, like if someone rear-ends their car in traffic. But I've still rarely seen anyone shout or scream, something that is common in my country even when you're not fighting with someone.

Mrs. Zamani raises her hand to feel Elyas' head, who ducks and then winces. *How badly was he hurt?* I wonder. The bandage covering his head looks sizeable.

The same police officer who talked to Elyas is heading towards me now.

"You're Mariam..." he asks, in the way Iranians do when they want your last name.

"Shah," I say. "Mariam Shah."

"And your husband is Malik...Shah." He looks up from his notebook questioningly. "Are you related?"

I am no stranger to this question anymore. "No. We're Pakistani."

"I see. What do you do here?"

"I'm a student. My husband and I both are."

"Your husband was in a car accident?"

"That's what the nurse told me when she called."

He points to the nurse I met first when I came here. "Is that her?"

"Yes."

“Do you know what happened?”

“Elyas was driving, but he doesn’t remember anything.”

“How do you know them?” He doesn’t gesture to Elyas and his mother, but he is looking at them.

“I know Elyas from college.”

“So you think it was an accident?”

I stare at him. “Well, yes. What else could it be?”

“We’re just covering our bases.” He shuts his notebook. “Okay. I’m going to be around here for a while, in case you think of something to tell me, alright?”

I have no idea what he means but I nod anyway.

Suddenly the air feels thick, like I am inhaling carbon dioxide. I get up and head out the French windows onto the terrace rooftop. Chairs are scattered as if this is a popular hangout, although right now it is mostly deserted except for a doctor in scrubs who sits texting. His wrapped sandwich lies untouched on the chair across from him.

I walk to the other end. Even though this is not the highest floor of this building, the terrace is still high enough that you can see most of Tehran. Even from up here you can tell it is crowded. The trademark endless traffic is clearly visible around the Milad Tower, its lights blinking distantly and blurred in the smog. The strong January wind blows through me.

I have so many questions: how long has my husband been here? Has he been unconscious the whole time? Why won’t anyone give me any details? As a child, I always got the impression that the more specific prayers were, the better they worked. My big sister Nadia and I would ask *Ammi* to ‘say a prayer’ over our stomachs, and she’d ask us where exactly it

hurt so she could place a hand over it while she whispered a *Surah* of the *Quran* or a *dua*. I want to pray for Malik, but I don't know where he's hurting.

This morning keeps playing in my head on repeat.

"I'm leaving," Malik had said from the door.

"*Khuda hafiz*", I had said without looking up from my laptop.

Now I wish I had. I wish I'd looked at him, maybe even kissed him on the cheek. That would have surprised him; random kisses always seemed like a better idea in my head than in reality. I imagined his face taking on that puzzled-yet-pleased look: one eyebrow up with the lopsided smile, the one that told me he was in a good mood. I wish I had exchanged even a few perfunctory words with him. Had I missed my chance? Had we already spoken to each other for the last time?

I try to even my breathing. *It's going to be okay. I'll talk to him when I see him.*

Mrs. Zamani appears beside me. "How are you, Mariam? Can I get you something to drink?"

Before I can reply I spot a doctor emerging from the OR area. Her scrubs are dishevelled and she is wearing her scrub cap backwards on top of her scarf. I force my feet to move; Mrs. Zamani follows behind me. My throat is prickly and my tongue feels like it is covered in sandpaper. When I speak, my questions come hurtling out.

"What's going on? Is Malik going to be okay? How much longer will he be in surgery?" The doctor holds up her hand. "I'm sorry, I can't stay long. I've got to get back in there. I just wanted to tell you that your husband was hurt badly, and that this will very likely take a while."

“What are his injuries?” I ask.

“He has a leg fracture and a collapsed lung... but our priority is the impact to his head.”

Oh my god.

"You should make yourself comfortable," she continues. "Sit. Get some tea. Let your mother take care of you."

No one corrects her about Mrs. Zamani not being my mother.

Elyas

There are things it is not possible to forget. Like the one time I saw my parents fight. I must have been thirteen, and to this day I do not know what they were fighting about, but I never forget. My occasional nightmare still involves them standing across the room, my father's face ablaze and my *maman* - who manages to even be angry quietly - not meeting his eye.

From my bed I can see till the OR doors, but right now Mariam is the only one in my line of sight. She is staring at the OR door as if she can somehow make herself see through glass. When a tall male doctor comes out of the OR, I cannot hear their conversation. Mariam is now standing with her back to me. I can only see the doctor's face, neutral and devoid of emotion. Are doctors everywhere so robot-like? When my cousin who is studying to be a physician told me that doctors are especially trained to forego emotion, I remember thinking, *isn't that how they train serial killers?*

Maybe he is just updating her, I think to myself even as the doctor takes off his scrub cap. As nuts as the waiting has been making me, in that moment I wish for nothing else.

But then Mariam starts backing away. “No,” she is saying, loud enough that I can hear her.
“No.”

Her hands are up in front of her as if she is pleading, or shielding herself. In that moment I know what has happened. It is impossible not to.

Then my mother is at Mariam’s side, but Mariam is as stiff as a board. And then the doctor is gone.

I close my eyes. All night long I've been on autopilot. I'm standing and sitting but really, I'm not here. I think I'm actually asleep somewhere and this is just my spirit walking around like in those stories my grandmother used to tell us. The pit in my stomach that bloomed when I saw Malik in the ambulance, looking like a rag doll, overtakes my body. He’s gone. He’s really gone.

Mariam

The doctor's lips are moving but my ears have muted the volume. I am standing in a strange hospital in a foreign country we were only living in temporarily, being told that Malik, my husband, is dead. There's nothing more to do.

But there is so much more, my brain is frantically yelling. Put your scrub cap back on and get back in there. Please. But his lips are still moving and I'm not sure I’m saying it out loud. There is so much more left for us to do, to see. The *Eram* gardens in Shiraz. The *Si-o-Seh Pol* in Esfahan.

We haven’t even decided to be parents yet.

How can there be nothing more to do? How could someone who's never met Malik be in charge of saving his life? Someone who doesn't know what he likes for breakfast, or how he hates being woken up before eleven?

I must have said some of this aloud, because the doctor's tone is kinder when he speaks again. "As sad as this is, it is worse for you to have hope."

And then he's gone, which is good for him because I don't think I'm in charge of my body anymore. My ears are buzzing and I'm wondering if I'm not the one who has died. Maybe this is just some horrible mix-up like one of my confusing nightmares. When I was a child I dreamt I was on a really long escalator and a strange woman told me I would have a baby sister. But when I looked in the mirror I wasn't Mariam anymore; my big sister Nadia was frowning back at me.

Elyas

Mariam's not answering me. It's like I'm not even here. And then my phone starts to ring. It's *Baba*, who asks me *where are you people at this time of night?* I can't explain, so I give the phone to my mother.

"*Baba's* coming," she informs me after she hangs up with him.

Then I look around to see Mariam has disappeared.

"Did you see where she went? Mariam?" I ask Rahnama urgently, who shakes her head. So despite my head now feeling like the size of a very large watermelon, I look for her in all the corridors of this floor, stopping short of the stairs. This place is huge. Even this floor alone feels like it'll never end. Mariam is nowhere to be found.

I force my legs to move and my brain to function. I tell it it can have some rest soon. I ask everyone I come across if they've seen Mariam. *Tall, slim, purple scarf?* Someone points to the emergency doors, the way we must have come in.

As I push open the door I'm greeted with a blast of icy wind. *How could it have gotten so cold so fast?* When I step out I see Mariam. She's standing with her side to me, the gale whipping the ends of her scarf upwards.

She's completely still, and if I didn't know better I'd think she wasn't breathing. There will be moments in your life that will slow down to -8x. I think for as long as I live, I will remember her, nose standing out red in her white face, blinking slowly, staring at nothing at all. For the rest of my days I will close my eyes and see her through the fog that blurs her edges and makes it look like she will turn into ash and float away on the wind. I will see her standing there in the freezing cold with no jacket on. And part of me is glad that I have, at last, found my punishment in this world.