

Chapter One

2013

The Center

“I made an appointment to see him.”

She said it as if she were seeing the dentist or a therapist or the pushy refrigerator salesman who had promised her and Walter a lifetime guarantee of cold milk and crisp vegetables and unspoiled cheese if only they would buy this brand-new model.

Walter dried the dishes, his gaze on the kitchen towel and its print of a yellow chick holding an umbrella. He didn't argue. Walter Archer's penchant for logic, his ability to let reason trump all, was a testament to Roya's own good judgment. For hadn't she married a man who was reasonable and, my goodness, unbelievably understanding? Hadn't she, in the end, not married that boy, the one she had met so many decades ago in a small stationery shop in Tehran, but lassoed her life instead to this Massachusetts-born pillar of stability? This Walter. Who ate a hard-boiled egg for breakfast almost every single day, who said as he dried the dishes, “If you want to see him, then you should. You've been a bit of a wreck, I'm afraid.”

By now Roya Archer was almost American, not just by marriage but by virtue of having been in these United States for over five decades. She could remember a childhood spent in the hot and dusty streets of Tehran, playing tag with her little sister, Zari, but her life now was carefully enclosed in New England.

With Walter.

One visit to one shop a mere week ago—to buy paper clips!—had cracked everything open. Once again she was mired in 1953. Cinema Metropole in the middle of Iran's largest city that contentious summer. The red circular sofa in the lobby, over which a chandelier's crystals glistened like corpulent tears, smoke from cigarettes floated in wisps. Up the stairs and into the movie theater he had led her, and there on the screen, stars with foreign names caressed each other. After the film, he had walked with her in the summer twilight. The sky was lavender and layered with shades of purple so varied, they seemed impossible. He had asked her to marry him near the jasmine-soaked bushes. His voice cracked when he said her name. They had exchanged countless love letters, planned their union. But in the end, nothing. Life had pulled out from under her everything that they had planned.

No worries.

Roya's mother had always said that our fate is written on our foreheads when we're born. It can't be seen, can't be read, but it's there in invisible ink all right, and life follows that fate. No matter what.

She had squished that boy out of her mind for decades. She had a life to build, a country to get to know. Walter. A child to raise. That Tehran boy could very well be squeezed to the absolute bottom of the bucket, like a rag useless and worn out and pressed so far down into the depths that after a while he was almost forgotten.

But now she could finally ask him why he had left her there in the middle of the square.



Walter maneuvered the car into the slippery spot narrowed by snowbanks. When they jerked to a stop, Roya couldn't open the car door. Somehow, during their long drive together, they'd become locked in.

He came around and opened the car door because he was Walter, because he had been raised by a mother (Alice: kind, sweet, smelled of potato salad) who had taught him how to treat a lady. Because he was seventy-seven and couldn't comprehend why young men today didn't handle their wives like fragile glass. He helped Roya out of the car and made sure her knitted scarf protected her nose and mouth against the wind. Together they walked carefully across the parking lot and up the steps of the gray building of the Duxton Senior Center.

A burst of overheated air greeted them in the lobby. A young woman, about thirty, her blond hair in a bun, sat behind a desk. A plastic badge with the name CLAIRE was pinned to her chest. Flyers tacked onto a bulletin board behind her desk exclaimed "Movie Night!" and "Bavarian Lunch!" all with exclamation marks, even as the edges of the flyers furled, even as crumpled people in wheelchairs inched their way across the linoleum floor and others pushing walkers steadied themselves so as not to fall.

"Hi there! Joining us for Friday lunch today?" Claire's voice was loud.

Walter opened his mouth to say something.

"Hello, he won't," Roya quickly said. "My husband is going to try the famous faux lobster roll at the Dandelion Deli. I looked it up on the Yelp. So rare to find lobster roll served in the middle of

winter, don't you think? Even if it's fake." She was rambling. She was trying so hard not to be nervous. "It was given five stars."

"That deli?" The receptionist looked surprised.

"Their lobster roll," Roya mumbled.

Walter sighed. He held up five fingers to indicate to Claire that his wife believed in the five stars.

"Oh, okay! Lobster!" Claire nodded. She pronounced it *lob-stah*. "Have to trust those Yelp reviews!"

"Go on, then," Roya said gently to her husband. She raised herself on her toes to kiss Walter's freshly shaven cheek. The crepey skin, his Irish Spring soap scent. She wanted to reassure him.

"Righty-oh." Walter nodded. "You got it. Off I go, then." But he didn't move.

She squeezed his hand, the familiar soft grip of her life.

"Don't let her get into too much trouble now," Walter finally said to the receptionist. His voice was strained.

A blast of cold air filled the lobby when Walter walked out the double doors and descended into the icy parking lot.

Roya stood uneasily in front of the desk. She was suddenly overwhelmed by the smell of ammonia and some kind of stew. Beef? Definitely beef with onions. The heat, cranked up to compensate for the New England cold, made the stew smell overpowering. She couldn't believe she had actually come here. The radiators hissed, wheelchairs squeaked, it all suddenly felt like a terrible mistake.

"And how may I help *you*?" Claire asked. A gold cross hung around her neck. She looked at Roya with a strange expression, as though she knew her.

"I made an appointment to see someone," Roya said. "One of your assisted-living patients."

“Ah, you mean a resident. Great. And who may that be?”

“Mr. Bahman Aslan.” The words came out of Roya’s mouth slowly, like rings of smoke, visible and real. It had been years since she’d said his full name out loud.

The cross on Claire’s neck glinted under the fluorescent lights. Walter would be out of the parking lot by now.

Claire got up and came around the desk to face Roya. She gently took both of Roya’s hands in hers. “It is so nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Archer. I am Claire Becker, the assistant administrator at the Duxton Center. Thank you for coming. I have heard so very much about you. It means a lot to me that you are here.”

So she wasn’t the receptionist—she was an administrator. How did Claire Becker know Roya’s name? It must have been in the appointment book. She had made an appointment, after all. But why did this young woman act like she knew her? And how had she heard so much about her?

“Please come,” Claire said softly. “I’ll take you right to him.” This time she didn’t add the obligatory exclamation mark that seemed necessary for covering up misery around here.

Roya followed Claire down a corridor and into a large hall furnished with a long table and plastic folding chairs arranged on either side. But no one sat at the table playing bingo or gossiping.

Claire pointed to the far end of the room. “He’s been waiting for you.”

By the window sat a man in a wheelchair next to an empty plastic chair. His back was to them; Roya couldn’t see his face. Claire started to approach him, but then she stopped. She cocked her head and took in Roya from head to toe as if measuring her potential for safety, for harm, for drama. Claire fidgeted with her necklace. “Is there anything I can get you? Water? Tea? Coffee?”

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“Are you sure?”

“You are kind to ask. But no.”

Now it was Claire’s turn to linger. By God, no one wanted to leave Roya alone with this . . . resident. For crying out loud. As if she, a small woman in her seventies, held any kind of power over him or anyone else anymore. As if she, Roya Archer, could torch the place down with her presence, create a blast just by being there.

“I am good,” she said. She’d learned to say that from Americans: *I’m good, I’m fine, it’s all okay, okey-dokey*. Easy-peasy Americanisms. She knew how to do it. Her heart pounded, but she looked steadily at Claire.

Claire lowered her head and finally turned and walked out. The *click-click* of her heels as she left the room matched Roya’s extra-loud heartbeat.

She could still follow Claire and leave this smelly place, catch up to Walter before he finished his lunch, go home, climb into bed, and pretend never to have made this strange miscalculation. It wasn’t too late. She imagined Walter hunched over his ginger beer and lobster roll alone at that deli—poor thing. But no. She’d come here to finally find out.

One foot in front of the other, that was how you did it. She forced herself toward the wheelchair by the window. Her heels didn’t click; she had on her trusty gray thick-soled shoes. Walter had insisted that she wear snow boots, but she had refused. She was willing to accept a lot of things, but seeing her old lover for the first time in sixty years while wearing fat Eskimo boots was one of the few things she could not accept.

The man was oblivious to her presence, as if she didn’t exist.

“I’ve been waiting,” a voice suddenly said in Farsi, and Roya’s body buzzed. That voice had both energized and comforted her when they were inseparable.

It was 1953. It was summer. She was seventeen. New England melted away, and the cold outside and the false heat inside evaporated, and Roya's legs were tanned and toned, and they were standing, she and he, by the barricades, leaning onto the splintered wood, screaming at the top of their lungs. The crowd billowed, the sun burned her scalp, two long braids ended at her breasts, her Peter Pan collar was soaked in sweat. All around them, people pumped their fists and cried as one. Anticipation, the knowing of something new and better about to arrive, the certainty that she would be his in a free, democratic Iran—it was all theirs. They had owned a future and a fate, engaged in a country on the verge of a bold beginning. She had loved him with the force of a blast. It had been impossible to imagine a future in which she didn't hear his voice every day.

On the linoleum, Roya saw her feet, suddenly unrecognizable to her—in gray little-old-lady shoes with thick soles and tiny bows on top.

The man wheeled his chair around and his face broke into a smile. He looked tired; his lips were dry and deep lines scored his forehead. But his eyes were joyful and filled with hope.

"I've been waiting," he repeated.

Was it possible to slip so easily back? His voice was the same. It was him, all of it, the eyes, the voice, her Bahman.

But then she remembered why she had come. "I see." Her voice came out much stronger than she'd expected. "But all I've wanted to ask you is why on earth didn't you wait last time?"

She sank into the chair next to him, as tired as she'd ever been in all her years on earth. She was seventy-seven and exhausted. But as she remembered that cruel, disillusioning summer from which she'd never fully recovered, she felt as if she were still seventeen.