

PRAISE FOR ZULAIKHA

“Beautifully written, weaving past and present, *Zulaikha* is a tense and touching novel you won't soon forget.”

—**Anita Kushwaha**, the author of *Secret Lives of Mothers & Daughters*

“A hauntingly moving and brilliant book that paints a portrait of longing, heartache, love and hope. *Zulaikha* is an ambitious and powerful debut novel from a brave new voice bringing attention to the politics in Iran and how lives are affected, especially the lives of women. With sensitivity, Niloufar-Lily Soltani weaves a tale of courage, betrayal and forgiveness. Fast-paced and well-written, this story captures you from its first page and carries you along like the achingly beautiful notes of the oud.”

—**Sonia Saikaley**, author of *The Allspice Bath*

“Epic and intimate, *Zulaikha* contains the great sweep of a life lived against the backdrop of history. It is a rare pleasure to read a novel so perceptive and so wise.”

—**André Forget**, author of *In the City of Pigs*

ZULAIKHA

A NOVEL

Niloufar-Lily Soltani



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To Nina, my infinite hope

PREFACE

KHUZESTAN, THE SITE OF MUCH of Iran's oil reserves, is the most strategically important province in the south of Iran. Like many other provinces, Khuzestan is multi-ethnic. Arabs and Lurs comprise the primary workforce, though neither benefits much from oil revenues. Khuzestan's proximity to Arab countries and its long, shared history with Iran give the culture its unique flavour. In addition to Arab and Persian influences, Khuzestan is also influenced by the British, who discovered the oil reserves at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1951, the Iranian government, led by the new Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, nationalized the oil industry. Signs prohibiting Iranians from entering British territories were removed. The British no longer ruled the city. However, two years later, the coup arranged by the American government through Operation Ajax returned Mohamad Reza Shah Pahlavi to power. Mosaddegh's influence remained: Khuzestan was no longer subject to British control.

Imitating British suburbs in the heart of tropical Abadan, the British designed the architecture for the National Oil Company's

senior staff living quarters and built beautiful, fully furnished houses in the Beraim and Bovardeh neighbourhoods, complete with patios in their back yards.

Many oil company workers and other citizens lived on a long boulevard with numbered bus stops, which stretched from *Istgah Yek* to *Istgah Davazdah* and further.

The British and, later on, the Americans, worked for the National Oil Company of Iran as consultants and senior staff. With the 1979 revolution, which ended Mohammad Reza Shah's regime, they left the country.

A year later, Iraqi forces invaded Iran. Saddam Hussein's main objective was to capture Khuzestan. From 1980 to 1988, Iran was a war zone, with most fighting concentrated in Khuzestan. Khorramshahr, Abadan's twin city, was invaded first. When the war ended, it had claimed the lives of approximately one million people with more significant losses in Khuzestan.

Zulaikha—pronounced *Zuli-Ka*—is a figure, most likely historical, known in the Middle East. It was the name of the exotic and sensual wife of Potiphar, the Pharaoh's guard. Her obsessive story with Yusef or Joseph is told in the Quran, Bible, and Torah. Persian poet Jami (1414–1492) has a book of poetry named *Yusuf and Zulaikha*.

CHARACTERS AND NAMES

Madineh: Mother

Hessam: Zulaikha's younger brother

Gholam: Zulaikha's older brother

Assef: Zulaikha's husband, Sohrab's father

Sohrab: Zulaikha's son, Hessam's nephew

Abbass: Hessam's best friend

Abu: Abbass's father

Kia Chaharlangi: Hessam's friend

Jamshid Chaharlangi: Kia's father, also an old friend of Abu's

Maryam Chaharlangi: Jamshid's wife

Habib: Madineh's husband, Assef's friend

Mrs. Sara: Zulaikha's next door neighbour in Abadan

Sheikh Ahmed: Zulaikha's first husband in Bahrain

Aliah: Sheikh's first wife

Najwa: Abbass's fiancée

Abdul: Zulaikha's friend and lover

Kobra: Gholam's wife

Mousa: Gholam's son (Zulaikha's nephew and Sohrab's cousin)

Dr. Matlab: Prison guard, later a member of parliament

Nasim: Zulaikha's friend in Tehran

The Alipours: Zulaikha's employers and friends in Tehran

Reza: The Alipours' son, Sohrab's friend

Sheila: Sohrab's girlfriend in Holland

FARSI WORDS

Amu: Uncle (In Khuzestan, a stranger is called Amu to show respect and closeness)

Azizam: My dear

Bandari: Port-related (Bandari dance and music style belongs to Khuzestan and Hormozgan provinces.)

Azhir: Siren

Bastani: Ice cream

Bibi: Grandmother (Old Farsi)

Bebakhshid: Forgive me

Chador: A long cloak covering head to toe

Eidi: Gifts, of cash or otherwise, traditionally given to family and youth for Eid.

Ey Khoda: Calling God (Oh Mighty)

Faloodeh: Sorbet

Havoo: Second wife

Istgah Yek: Stop One

Istgah Seh: Stop Three

Istgah Haft: Stop Seven

Istgah Davazdah: Stop Twelve

Jan: Soul. Equivalent to *dear* when addressing loved ones (see *Azizam*)

Joon: An informal and modern version of *jan*

Kadu: Gift

Khanum: Lady, Madam, Ma'am

Khasteh Nabashi: An expression showing gratitude for another's hard work, wishing them to not be too tired

Khoda: Creator, God

Maman: Mum, used in contemporary times

Manteau: French word for a coat women wear as Hijab to cover themselves from neck to legs

Narges: Daffodils

Nowruz: New Day (Persian New Year's Day)

Pahlavan: A warrior, hero

Pesar: Boy, son

Sabzi: Herbs

Salaam: Hello

Shah: King

Shahr: City (In Khuzestan this word means downtown too.)

Shirini: Sweets and pastries traditionally distributed during a celebration

Soghati: Souvenir

Tajlil: Tribute

Tabrik/Mobarak: Congratulations

Tasilat: Condolences

Velgard: Stray

Volek: A slang term for “buddy,” used by people in Khuzestan

Zahr e mar: Snake poison (A phrase used to insult)

Zereshk: Barberry



PART 1

Two Airports

DECEMBER 2007

*Someone with his silence,
took me to the endless desert of madness.*

*Someone with his gaze,
took me to the vast sea of blood.*

Return me!

You, who threw me to the end,

Resume me!

-Hamid Mosadegh

IT WAS PAST THREE IN the morning. Tehran spread out beneath Zulaikha's airplane. Flying above Mount Damavand, covered in snow from top to bottom, she knew that Tehran must have seen a cold winter. Watching Tehran as the underworld, she wondered which would be safer, floating aimlessly in the air or landing in a city where you know you are in trouble.

Yesterday, before leaving Amsterdam, before feeling excited about returning home and sleeping in her bed, everything suddenly changed. A ghost of her past appeared in Europe, in a crowded airport as her pleasant vacation was about to end.

At one point in her life—she couldn't remember exactly when—she had wanted her ghosts to rest in peace and let her live without them, without Abbass's beauty and art, without Hessam's care and presence. She had managed to close their files and move on. But it was always enough to mention their names or ask about them: Abbass, her murdered friend, or Hessam, her missing brother. Enough to bring them back and let them haunt her. Yesterday, someone called their names. Someone asked about them.

This was her first visit to Holland after her now thirty-four-year-old son, Sohrab, left Iran six years ago. He lived in a small town, Haarlem, thirty kilometres north of Amsterdam, and drove a cargo semi-trailer truck for a living. He took two days off—all he could get, and he felt bad, but that was all Zulaikha expected from her son: to make his supervisor happy. "Driving a big truck requires skills. You're in demand, Sohrab," she said. "I'll be fine."

Thanks to their recent Skype video chats, Zulaikha was not too

shocked when she first saw her son at the airport. He had shaved just the way she had always told him to. Clean-cut.

When she first entered Sohrab's flat, the window to his front street looked welcoming. As she stepped forward, she recognized a book of poetry on the far end of the window shelf—a collection of poems and paintings by Sohrab Sepehri. She looked away, back to the street and then to Sohrab, as if remembering those poems would open their life story. She didn't go all the way to Holland to open that book. Not anymore.

On their first weekend, they caught a train to Amsterdam. She refrained from asking if Sohrab borrowed money to take her to Madam Tussaud's museum. While he worked long hours, she cleaned, cooked Sohrab's favourite meals—a celery stew and rice or beef cutlets and fries—and walked around Haarlem, staring at thin wooden houses lining canals. She had learned the direction from Sohrab's place to the town's main square path and even dared to enter the stunning Grote Kerk Church. She loved walking. In Tehran, too, she often walked to the old Pepsi-Cola factory and then back to the path to Nasim's bookstore. It was Nasim who had told her, "You would need to entertain yourself there. Trust me and take a few books. I read more when I visit my daughters in Canada." So, Zulaikha had brought a few magazines that occupied her with crossword puzzles. Two romance books, too.

When Sohrab got home, he kept apologizing before falling asleep on his sofa.

"You were right—the Christmas songs and the decorations—that church down the street—I'm having a good time," she said.

"Nice try, *Maman*," Sohrab said. "Still not a good liar. You're bored to tears. We'll take the Amsterdam Canal tour next weekend. You'll love it."

Zulaikha made a face. "Maybe you're bored. Not me."

Sohrab managed to take her to the Canal tour just a few days before her departure day. How she enjoyed watching the historic buildings from the water and listening to her son explain the city's history.

Sohrab had accompanied her as she got her boarding pass. His puffy brown eyes looked tired—but the puffiness was him—Sohrab had said people mistook him as part-Japanese or Korean. She had heard that when he was a child, too. He was now a young man standing beside her in the lineup to another separation.

He was once her eight-year-old boy who didn't want to part from her—nevertheless, he had walked to the Basij Range Rover, his tiny body obeying her demand, but his eyes betrayed him. They mirrored his pain. She'd had to send her child to a safe place far from the war zone. His eyes questioned everything. They especially questioned her decision.

Sohrab glanced at her passport. "I know I left you alone too much," Sohrab said. "Next time, I'll take some time off. I promise."

He put her suitcase on the scale and helped her to check in. The airline clerk pointed to the right with a smile. They had three hours to kill before the flight to Tehran. She could use this time to stay with Sohrab that much longer, but instead, she said, "I think I'll just go through security and find my gate. You go back and get good rest tonight."

"You sure?"

She stood on her tiptoes to reach his height and kiss his forehead. "Very sure," she muttered.

"This was great, *Maman*—especially all the food."

"At least I know you have food for a week."

They both laughed and held each other.

"I'm working tonight—I'll sleep on my way home," he said. "Ask Reza to call me when you land in Tehran." Reza was his old friend.

She nodded.

As Sohrab reached the airport's sliding doors, he turned around and glanced at her. There she was, feeling confused and empty, as if a microbe was attacking her immune system, making her thirsty and nauseous. Then the doors closed, and his presence faded from her sight.

Zulaikha followed the path toward her gate, and a few steps further, she joined a crowded lineup. She showed her documents to the security guard, who said hello and directed her to line number two—it was shorter than the others. Carrying only a handbag and her coat made going through security smoother, but the thirst still bothered her.

A bathroom and a water fountain were just a few steps away. Zulaikha searched in her bag and found her asthma inhaler. She often ensured it was there even if she didn't need it. After washing her face and drinking some water, she could see better, but still, the airport was like a full suspension bridge where she stood with so many other strangers.

Her boarding pass showed her gate number. She could read the number eight on it, and down the way, she saw a sign to her gate. She should be fine.

A man was approaching her. He looked familiar.

He might be another passenger, a friendly countryman who wanted to help a lost woman.

“Are you Iranian?” he asked.

Her heart shifted in her chest.

It was Kia. Only now, with grey hair. He looked shorter than she had remembered.

What should I do? Shake his hand? Kiss his cheeks or hug him?

It had been almost forty years since she last saw him. Long enough to erase many details from her memory, except the retained distasteful moments.

He spoke her name. “Zulaikha?”

She walked toward him, still trying to understand the situation. His hands held her arms as if trying to shake and return her to reality.

“Unbelievable! Isn't it?” he said with joy in his voice.

Did he still have his Khuzestan provincial accent, or was it a sweet American one he had developed all these years? Or both?

“What are you doing here?” Kia asked.

“I was visiting my son. What about you?” How embarrassing this heat was. Her cheeks must have been flushed.

He looked stunned. “Your son?”

Why is he asking me with surprise?

“My son, Sohrab. He lives in Haarlem—near Amsterdam. He just left. He had to go back to work,” she said. “What about you? Are you flying to Tehran?”

“Yes, I’m going to—” He coughed. “Well, it’s my father’s funeral.”

The word “funeral” echoed in her head. Jamshid, that strong, tough man, was now a corpse. A harmless corpse.

“*Tasliat*, God bless his soul,” she sighed. “It’s hard to believe so much time has passed, and *Amu* Jamshid is gone.”

Kia thanked her for her blessing as he looked at his watch. “I think it’s time to go to our gate.”

Walking beside him, Zulaikha was careful not to show she was curious about his appearance or how he aged. She kept her gaze away and looked straight ahead.

Kia asked about her son’s father. “Do you and your husband live in Tehran now?”

He’s curious about my life, about Assef.

“Oh, we aren’t with each other anymore. It ended long ago—even before the war—before I moved to Tehran.”

“Who was he? Did I know him?”

“No, you didn’t. My mother got married a couple of years after you left Iran. He was her husband’s close friend. He lives in the Emirates now—sometimes in Dubai, sometimes in Kuwait.”

“So you’re still in touch. That’s a good thing.”

“We still talk on occasion. You know how it is when you have children. Do you have children?”

Kia told her about his life, his daughter Sherry and his separation from her mother. They both lived in Los Angeles, but Kia resided in Canada, in Vancouver. She had learned about Vancouver in recent years. Nasim’s daughters had lived there.

A few drops of sweat cooled her forehead. She rummaged through her purse and opened a Ziploc bag. She used her passport and paperwork as a fan.

“So, your mother remarried?” Kia asked.

“Yes, she did.”

“And she’s well?”

“She passed away a few years ago, and her husband was killed in a car accident long before that.”

“I’m sorry,” he was louder than before. “You’ve been through a lot.”

Silence reigned for a time. She was searching for a short sentence that did not sound like whining, words sharp enough to express that it did not matter anymore. Something like, “You left, but life did not stop,” or, “While you were away, so much happened to all of us—not just me, but to your friends, too.”

Instead, she said, “Yes, a lot is an understatement. Did you hear what happened to my brother, Hessam, or his friend Abbass?”

Kia stared at her for a few seconds. “I did.” He looked at his watch again. “I’m very sorry about all of it.”

They continued walking side by side and stopped at their gate. “My father wrote to me about Hessam and his disappearance—about Abbass, too,” Kia said. “It was devastating for me. I always wanted to know how you and your family coped with it. I knew how close you were, but you know how it was back then.” He stared at the flight display. “My father wrote to me about people—as if he read my mind and knew what I wanted to hear. He wrote to me that you were married too.”

Perhaps it was Jamshid’s guilty conscience writing those letters. Before that fateful night, almost forty years ago, when Jamshid knocked on their door in Abadan, Zulaikha had always respected him. He was a senior National Oil Company staff member—he always wore a black tie and white shirt. But that night, he wasn’t wearing a tie. He was wearing brown Luri attire. Perhaps looking cozier would help manipulate his subordinates. That night he told Zulaikha’s mother that he had a proposition for them. Some proposition.

Kia must have a first-class ticket and would separate from her soon. She would remain in her seat without thinking about him or the past, only planning for after her arrival: finding a taxi, sleeping, showering, and living her life. Kia, with his charm and

politeness, and Jamshid, as a dead man—both seemed harmless. But what she remembered from them was far from harmless. She checked her bag for her inhaler one more time.

They noticed a commotion at the departure gate beside them as a KLM airport worker made an announcement. Zulaikha only understood the words flight and Tehran. She glanced at Kia. “What did they say?”

“Our flight was cancelled,” he said. “What’s wrong with you? Do you have asthma?”

“Yes, but it’s under control.” There was no point in telling him how she got her illness. The illness that had become a part of her identity.

She followed Kia to the front desk of their gate, where the blond woman from KLM was.

“All flights are cancelled due to security reasons.” Kia translated it for Zulaikha.

“My son will be worried about me if he doesn’t hear from me tonight.”

Kia lent her his cell. “Call him.”

She dropped a few items while searching for her journal in her purse. Kia helped her put them back, making her feel like a fool. She found the notebook and dialled Sohrab’s number a few steps away from Kia in a more private corner.

“Do you want me to come back?” Sohrab asked. “We can hang out in Amsterdam tonight.”

“There’re many of us here—I think every passenger is Iranian, so I’ll be fine. Not to worry, I can talk to people around me.”

“Whose phone are you using?”

She did not tell him about Kia. “I borrowed it from another passenger here at the gate. I’ll call you as soon as we’re okay to fly or in Tehran.”

When she returned the cell phone to Kia, a KLM employee gave all passengers directions for a shuttle to a hotel. Zulaikha followed Kia and the others, in part feeling lucky that he was there like a relative or friend to tell her what to do or what they were saying. Another part of her was annoyed and uncomfortable

that the closeness had reasserted itself, even decades later. But every moment she walked beside him, the pain he and his father had inadvertently caused her so long ago became closer. Sharper.

In the hotel lobby, Kia asked her about her room number. "Let's have tea later this evening," he said. "It's so strange to see you here today right when I'm going to my father's funeral. Don't you think?" He hung his coat on his carry-on bag's handle and didn't wait for her answer. "I'll come to get you in a couple of hours—"

"Maybe it's best that you get some rest. It'll be very busy when you get home with your family and the funeral." She hung her handbag around her shoulder. It felt heavier than before.

"I know I won't be able to sleep. It's been days since I've slept. I think this may be an opportunity for me to explain things to you a bit."

"Explain?" She pressed the elevator button.

"Yes, about when—I mean—after I left Iran."

She glanced at him. He was still handsome and charming. Remembering her younger self's infatuation with him felt funny. "It was a long time ago. Do we have to?"

They entered the elevator.

But this would finally give her a chance to ask him questions—not just about what happened between them but what he heard about Hessam's disappearance.

"No, we don't—but I think—oh, this is my floor,"

"Okay, I'll wait for you," Zulaikha said.



Being in this luxury hotel was far from her reality in Tehran, yet as she showered, the scent of soap and shampoo was familiar. She had not thought about this smell for a long time, the aroma of Abadan's Kuwaiti bazaar. Running into Kia was awakening long-buried memories.

Figuring out how to make a cup of tea with the coffee maker was a feat. The room was quiet, and television programs were in English or Dutch. Her eyelids drooped, and she surrendered to

the sleep enveloping her body.

A knock on the door startled her. She sat up and looked around, disoriented. Her half-filled cup, and the scent of shampoo and soap lingering in the air, helped her remember where she was and who she was waiting for. But why was Kia knocking so harshly? She looked through the peephole, expecting to see Kia. Instead, three men were on the other side of the door, two Caucasians and one man who appeared Middle-Eastern, perhaps Iranian. "Yes?" she asked.

One of them spoke Farsi. "Please open the door. We're from airport security."

"Is something wrong?"

"Ma'am, we just want to ask you a few questions. We are showing our ID cards. Please let us know if you see them." Two of the men held their identification cards up to the peephole. She couldn't read them and relied on the interpreter's speaking on their behalf.

She opened the door, panic rising in her throat.

"What's happening?"

The Iranian introduced the two men as his American and European representatives. "It's just a procedure, nothing to worry about."

"A procedure for what?"

"We'll explain. It won't take more than a few minutes."

"But I was about to see a friend. He's in the same hotel. I just ran into him before the flight."

The two men looked at each other. "Don't worry, Ma'am, you'll be back very soon," the translator said. "We'll leave a message for him."

They escorted her into a black BMW parked in the hotel loading dock. She tried to communicate with the Iranian fellow as they drove, but he didn't sound friendly. "Listen, Ma'am, I'm only an interpreter and not supposed to chat with you, so if you don't want more trouble than you already have, just sit back and keep quiet."

I am in trouble. But why?

“I just have to know what’s going on. Translate this: I want to contact my son right now.”

The two men listened to the interpreter as he translated her words. The American permitted her to call her son using his phone.

“I called to say—where are you?”

“I’m at work, driving, *Maman*. Anything wrong? Did you borrow another phone again?”

She paused for a few moments. “Yes, I did. Nothing is wrong. Sorry, I forgot you’re working a night shift.”

“Did they tell you when you can fly?”

“Not yet, but I just wanted to say I’m still here. Is everything okay with you?”

“Since we talked? Yes, I’m fine. You should get some rest.”

The American glared at her.

“You’re right. I should. Drive safely.”

They arrived in the Amsterdam canal belt—Sohrab had taken her on a cruise there a few days earlier.

Disrupting her reverie, the strangers ordered her to leave the car. Taking the elevator up two flights, they entered an enormous office, surprisingly busy with people wearing earphones, talking in different languages she could not discern. It only gave her a lonely feeling. They passed through one office into a hallway.

“Here. Take a seat,” the interpreter said.

A tall blond female officer at a desk gave her some forms in Farsi to complete and took her picture and fingerprints. She led her down the hall to a bare room and asked her to wait. The room had no windows—a wooden bench rested against one wall, and a chair stood in the centre. Four video cameras pointed toward the chair. She sat on the bench and looked down at the floor. Her ponytail still smelled of shampoo.

The two men and the same translator entered the room a few minutes later. The translator sat beside her, a bit too close. She moved slightly to the left, giving him space to make notes. The first question came from the American man.

“Sorry, Ma’am. This will only take a few minutes. I’m from

the U.S. Homeland Security, but I work in Europe. Our job is to prevent any suspicious activities or shipments to or from my continent.” He glanced at the translator and paused for him to translate.

Zulaikha was about to ask what was suspicious about her when the American spoke again. “What is your occupation?”

“My occupation? I’m a housekeeper. Why?”

“What is your relationship with Mr. Kia Chaharlangi?”

“Did something happen to him?”

“Don’t answer the question with a question. He’s fine. Now, answer the question, please,” he asked sternly.

In a flash, she remembered a bearded Iranian interrogator who had once told her, “Don’t answer the question with a question.”

“I ran into him in the airport a few hours ago,” she swallowed. “I know him from a long time ago. He was my brother’s friend.”

“Your brother?” inquired the European man. “Where does your brother live? Here in Holland?”

“Why are you asking?”

“We just asked you not to answer a question with—”

“But your questions are strange. What difference does it make where my brother lives? He went missing in the war a long time ago.”

“Which war?” the American asked.

Was the Iran-Iraq war already forgotten?

“Which war? The Iran-Iraq war, obviously. How many wars has Iran had in recent history?”

The men did not show any emotions. The translator looked down, trying to make minimum eye contact with her.

“How about your son’s occupation and status in Holland?”

“What is this about? Can I go to the bathroom? I have asthma—I need air—I need my medicine.”

Zulaikha could tell they were used to doing this, frightening people—putting a person’s life under their microscope. But she was experienced, too. She should be firm with them. “I said I want to go to the bathroom and call my son again right now,” she shouted.

The men glanced at each other. The European man opened the door, and the translator followed her out.

“Who do you think you are?” She turned and yelled at the Iranian translator, “Are you following me to the bathroom or want to hear my conversation with my son?”

“Calm down, *khanum*. This isn’t Iran.”

“Oh, Iran sounds like an awful place to you?” she said grimly. “Why are they asking about my son’s job? He’s a hardworking driver. Tell them that.”

“Keep your voice down,” he said. “I thought you needed the bathroom.”

The female Dutch officer, a broadly-built woman in her forties, approached them. She asked Zulaikha something with concern in her eyes. Zulaikha pointed at the telephone on the desk and tried to show her that she wanted to call someone. The officer put the phone in front of her.

The Iranian translator frowned and said something to the officer.

She dialled Sohrab’s number and said, “Sohrab, *jan*. Salaam—don’t worry, I’m okay, but I need your help—hold on—Can you hold, please?” She gave the phone to the officer. “Can you talk to him?” Then she said in English, “Please.” Her desperate look worked. The woman spoke to Sohrab and then hung up, offering a kind smile.

“I think we should go back to the room,” the translator said. “They’re waiting for us.”

“I need to go to the washroom—I’ve said that how many times?”

She went toward the sign of the female toilet in the hallway, and when she looked back, she saw the female officer talking on the phone.

As Zulaikha washed her face, she tried to understand her situation. *Why am I in trouble here and concerning Kia? They seem to be making a stupid mistake thinking we have any connection.*

She walked back to the Dutch officer’s desk. The interpreter was no longer there. A tall, young woman with long wavy dark-brown hair was waiting for her. From the helmet she held in her

hand, Zulaikha assumed that she had biked there.

“My name is Sheila. I came as soon as Sohrab called me,” the young woman said in Farsi as she held her hand.

“Sohrab called you?” Zulaikha shook her hand.

“Yes, he did. I live close by. I work here. You’re safe with me now. Don’t worry.”

Sheila greeted the same female officer in Dutch.

“This policewoman says she thought you were having problems with these men and their interpreter,” Sheila said.

Zulaikha had been in Holland for three months, but Sohrab never mentioned this beauty. It was not the place or time to ask her about that. “You’re a godsend,” Zulaikha said.

As Sheila smiled, Zulaikha noticed the corners of her mouth. Her lips were upturned naturally, giving her the semblance of a smile even when she wasn’t. “Don’t worry too much. The Dutch government is afraid of scandals involving immigrants.”

“Can I speak to Sohrab again?”

“Of course,” she said. “He may be talking to an immigration lawyer he knows. Let’s go and see what these gentlemen have to say to us.”

Zulaikha followed Sheila back to the interrogation room, where Sheila told them she was a Dutch authority and gave them Sohrab’s immigration lawyer’s phone number. They made a call in the hall, and only the British man returned to speak to Sheila before leaving.

“Where did they go?” Zulaikha asked.

“Back to their offices—wherever the hell that is. They said you can return to Iran on the next flight.”

“Return to Iran,” Zulaikha repeated as if she had an option never to return. “Do you think they might report it to Iran, too?”

“I doubt that. The West’s relationship with Iran is cold. But the Iranian aviation authority may ask why the flight was cancelled or passengers were kept for questioning.”

“This can’t be real,” Zulaikha muttered.

“What’s the matter?” Sheila asked.

“You know how it is there.”

“Let’s hope nothing happens.”

“I don’t know what would’ve happened without you,” she said.

“I’m glad I could help. Would you like me to find out how your friend is faring?”

“My friend?”

“Yes, the gentleman you were with. Mr. Kia. Sorry, I forget his last name.”

“I think he’ll be fine without a translator. He’s been in North America for a long time.”

“Let me get you something.” Sheila brought her a cup of tea and a chocolate bar. “Sorry, I couldn’t find anything better.”

The hot tea was an enormous relief. “I don’t want to keep you.”

“Don’t worry. Let’s wait for Sohrab.”

They sat and chatted about Zulaikha’s visit. “It’s quite strange that I’m just meeting you now. I wish Sohrab had told me about you before,” Zulaikha said.

“It’s probably because we haven’t been in touch for a while.” Sheila used a rubber band to tie her hair up. “We met here when he was a newcomer. But then Sohrab found a job and moved to Haarlem—we were both too busy to keep in touch.” She got up from her seat. “I think I’ll leave you to rest a bit. You must be exhausted.”

Zulaikha leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms. “So sorry.” She yawned.

Sheila went to chat with her colleagues.

A tap on her shoulder woke her up. Sohrab was with another man—he seemed to be from Pakistan. “Wake up, *Maman*. We can go now. This is Kamal,” Sohrab said. “He’s my lawyer friend I told you about. I pulled him out of a Christmas party.”

Zulaikha, still feeling groggy, got up to shake the man’s hand.

“Don’t worry,” Kamal said in English.

Sheila put her helmet back on, and this time, she hugged Zulaikha. “So sorry we met under these conditions. You should visit again soon.”

“I feel I’ve found a new friend,” Zulaikha said. “We should keep in touch.”

“For sure,” she then glanced at Sohrab. “Let’s go biking soon.”

“After winter, anything you say,” he hugged her. “You be careful out there. Okay?”

Even in the midst of her dilemma, Zulaikha noticed the spark between Sheila and Sohrab.



Kamal gave them a ride to the airport hotel in his red BMW that smelled of cologne. He didn’t say much in the car, perhaps because of their language barrier, or it was too late to be chatty—it was after midnight. Zulaikha’s flight was rescheduled for early the following morning, so they walked to the airport and sat in a coffee shop. Over tea, Sohrab told her what he’d heard about Kia.

“He travels to the Middle East and the US a few times a year—probably he buys and sells oil equipment,” Sohrab said. “These days, with the sanctions against Iran, they seem to keep an eye on people like him. Those men had asked about my bank account,” he chuckled. “They suspected he sends loads of money to us or he’s in some illegal business with you. Some joke.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m an expert in all the troubles of the world.”

“But, *Maman*, this man Kia, how far back did you know him?”

“I know him and his family from childhood, long before you were born.”

“Were you close?”

“No.” She answered abruptly. “Why do you ask?”

Sohrab leaned slightly forward with his elbows on the table. “Why don’t I remember you ever talking about him? Was he Uncle Hessam’s friend?”

What could I tell you about Kia and his family? That they killed my baby?

“Yes, he was your Uncle Hessam’s childhood friend. You never met him.”

“But I remember most of my uncle’s friends. I remember Uncle Abbass like it was yesterday. But nothing about this man, Kia.”

“Something happened between Kia and Uncle Hessam in the past. Their friendship ended.”

“What happened?”

All these years, Zulaikha had managed to eliminate Kia from the list of friends her son should know about. What could she share in this airport just a couple of hours before leaving?

“Something very personal had happened between our families—I’m too tired, and it was a long time ago.”

“Don’t you think he was in contact with Uncle Hessam before or after his disappearance—if they were that close?”

Zulaikha felt dryness in her throat. “No. I don’t think so. You’ve started investigating again. You never give up, do you?”

Sohrab patted her hand. “Don’t be upset, *Maman*. I was just wondering.”

She was eager for a subject change. She smiled mischievously. “It’s my turn to ask you a question now.”

He raised his eyebrows in anticipation of what she might be getting at.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything about Sheila?”

“We’re just friends, *Maman*. I met her here in the immigration office when I needed a translator four years ago.”

“Just friends can change. Can it not?”

“You have a flight to catch, and I think they’ll give you your new boarding pass soon. Call me from Tehran, okay?”

Zulaikha hugged him again. She hadn’t cried when he’d dropped her off at the airport the first time. She refused to show her tears to her son, but now she couldn’t restrain herself.

“What’s the matter? Everything will be fine, *Maman*.”

“I don’t know. I’m suddenly worried. I don’t want to be questioned again in Tehran.”

“Hopefully, nothing will happen. I’ll call Reza to give him a heads-up. Just call me when you get there.” He kissed her cheek.

It was almost half past three in the morning when her flight landed in Tehran. She remained in her seat for a long time, until there was nobody left on the plane but her and the flight attendants. She was in no rush.

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