

## Chapter 1

Afshin and I had been married six months, according to an Iranian Shiite Muslim tradition. Although most couples would still see themselves as newlyweds at this point, we knew our marriage would end at midnight, as planned from the beginning. With only two hours left, I yearned to make love with Afshin one last time, knowing that this would be the single act forbidden to us in the new roles we were about to assume. When he trotted down the stairs, though, I realized it was too late. Weeks earlier we'd agreed to end our marriage with a dance. And now he was wearing his dance shoes.

Afshin turned on the CD player, and the Cajun music of Beau Soleil reverberated throughout the room. A sob erupted from him as he clasped me to his chest. I was surprised by my own calm. After composing himself, he gathered me in waltz position. We danced for a moment at half time, our bodies swaying as one. Suddenly he stepped away, and his feet started beating the full rhythm into the wood floor. I willed my feet to join his. With tears coursing past his lips, he smiled at my attempt to keep up, and I smiled back at the face I'd come to love ferociously.

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Only nine months earlier Afshin's friend, Milad, answered the usual ad I had placed with the local university's housing department. He explained that his friend was not in town yet, and he was making the rental decision in Afshin's stead. After examining the room, Milad told me that Afshin could move in the following week.

Meeting Milad reawakened in me a desire to understand Iran. The images I had seen on television in 1979—thousands of fists punching through a sea of billowing black fabric, from women within who thundered “Death to America”—usually came to mind when I heard the country’s name. I was shaken and wondered why they hated us.

Through my new tenant I might have a chance to learn, first-hand, about the real Iran.

A week later I answered the clang of the Swiss cowbell at my front door to find a young man in well-worn jeans, an orange T-shirt molded to his chest. His sparkling eyes met mine. With a day-old beard and curly black hair, he matched my image of an Iranian man.

I invited Afshin to join me for a chat on the patio around the side of the house. We sat across from each other in the shade of tall white pines—their fragrance freshening the sweltering summer air.

“So, is this your first time in Girton?”

“No, I lived here last year with two friends. But we left for the summer, and when we came back we were not able to find a place together. They have each found rooms.” A shadow of sadness passed his eyes. “I’m going to miss living with them.”

“I’ll be your friend.” The words spilled out, surprising me. I had never before offered friendship this way to a tenant.

He glanced at me, smiling.

“You’re studying mathematics?” I asked, quickly filling the silence.

“Yes, I’m a doctoral student at NYU, but I live here to be near my friends. I have to be in New York only two days a week.”

I explained my usual schedule, working from eight to four-thirty at a psychiatric hospital, going to the gym four times a week, and pursuing various hobbies in the evening. Afshin told me that on days he didn't go to New York, he'd be working on his dissertation most of the time, but also playing soccer and spending time with his two friends.

"I think we'll make out fine." I rose and he sprang to his feet. When we reached the front door, he stepped ahead to open it. Normally I disliked such formalities, but his politeness, I liked.

While he luggered his suitcase upstairs to his room, I retrieved a copy of the house rules from the buffet drawer in the dining room. The rules simplified life. I had reviewed them and made adjustments over the years, as I learned from experience what had to be spelled out for students from Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, China, and other faraway places.

Afshin returned a few minutes later, and I handed the document to him. "If you're not comfortable with anything on this list, please let me know."

"This is your home and I will respect it," he said, bowing his head.

After only a few days I noticed that when Afshin wasn't doing research at the university library or teaching in New York, he often worked at the dining-room table, papers spread in front of him and pencil in hand, ready to work out a new problem. I usually preferred that my tenants study in their rooms, but I enjoyed watching Afshin at work. When he squinted at some point in the distance, scribbled his calculations, and then resumed his concentrated gaze, I felt vicarious pleasure in his discovery process.

That first Sunday Afshin cooked a large pot of chicken and rice stew, enough to last for a few meals. I tasted its fragrant aroma in the air. Three days later he prepared a spinach dish with flour and eggs. Compared to my other tenants—male students who usually ate meals requiring minimal preparation—Afshin cooked like a chef.

One day, not long after he moved in, he stood at the kitchen counter slicing onions and peppers as I cleaned around the cabinet handles. I thought it might be a good time to satisfy my curiosity.

“Afshin . . . you’re a Muslim, aren’t you?” I had seen the prayer rug in his room.

He turned to me with raised eyebrows. “Yes, I am.”

“I’ve been curious about Islam for a long time, and more so lately.” I hesitated, but what I had first heard in the Baptist church as a teenager still bothered me. “Is it true that Muslims think of Americans as blue-eyed devils?”

He looked surprised. After a moment he said, “America is sometimes referred to as ‘The Great Satan,’ but that’s in reference to the government, not the citizens.”

“Can you separate them?” I asked, leaning back on the counter.

“Of course,” he said, with a puzzled expression. “The government often does things that citizens don’t know about.” He paused. “For example, do you know about Mossadegh?”

I shook my head. He explained that early in the twentieth century the British had bought the rights to Iranian oil fields from rulers who had no idea what they were selling. British companies prospered while Iranians remained in poverty.

In the fifties, however, a politician named Mossadegh was democratically elected prime minister of Iran. Mossadegh tried to regain control of the oil fields. Average Iranians finally had hopes of getting out of poverty. But then the British turned to the Americans for help—and they got it. The CIA staged a coup to overthrow Mossadegh and put the Shah back in power. Then the Shah allowed the British to take back control of the oil. Once again, Iranian laborers in the oil fields had to work and live like slaves.

The oil in the frying pan started to smoke. Afshin spun around, swept the vegetables into the pan, and stirred the spattering mixture.

“I didn’t know,” I said, wondering whether the story was accurate. I felt encouraged to ask more questions. “And what about women? Do they still have to keep their faces covered in public?”

His head dropped, and he shook it slowly before looking up. “No, no, no. They don’t cover their faces, only their *hair*. And at home women dress the way you do here, but more feminine.”

“But when it gets hot out, how can they stand to wear those big . . . uh, robes?”

“They are called *chadors*.”

“They must be terribly uncomfortable. Don’t women want to choose what to wear in such hot weather?”

“I never heard women complain. They were the ones who wanted the *chador* back after the Shah banned it in the 1930s. He wanted them to dress like Western women, and they resented it. They wanted to keep their cultural identity. After the ban on the *chador*, religious women never left home.”

He sounded confident of his opinion. Surely many women resisted the *chador*. But, given my desire to learn more from him, I decided not to challenge him.

My hunger stirred. I took pea soup from the refrigerator and placed it in the microwave. I almost offered some to Afshin, but then remembered that it contained ham, a definite no-no for Muslims. While the soup was heating up, I watched Afshin sprinkle curry powder and pour a jar of marinara sauce over the vegetables. The sweet aroma made me salivate. I wished we shared meals, yet I was happy to simply share his company.

I grabbed a piece of whole-grain bread and carried my food into the dining room. A moment later Afshin brought his plate and settled into a chair catty-corner to my left. His eyebrows joined just above his nose in a wisp of vertical hairs.

I studied my soup deliberately: the shade of green, the bits of ham poking through the surface. I hoped he hadn't noticed me staring at him.

"Do men still have more than one wife?" I asked, turning to him again. I hoped that he'd appreciate my interest. As for me, the hunger pangs for information coming straight from the source wouldn't let me feel satisfied with the morsels he'd already shared.

Afshin put his fork down, and I caught him scowling. He took a deep breath and his dark eyes softened, but I felt uneasy. Had my questions started to feel like an interrogation?

"No," he said. "Having more than one wife is no longer well accepted although, in the villages, it still happens."

“I’m glad to hear that. But marriages are still arranged, aren’t they?”

“It’s true that mothers search for suitable mates for their children, but these days many people find their own.” He scooped up some food, chewed quickly, swallowed, and added, “Parents must still approve.”

“But isn’t that limiting? My mother didn’t want me to get married when I did, and yet my marriage was good.”

“Maybe yours was, but look at the high divorce rate in the U.S. It’s terrible,” he said, his voice rising.

“Is that so bad? Is it worse than staying with someone who doesn’t treat you well or doesn’t love you?”

“When you marry, you make a commitment. Marriage is about devotion. I believe being devoted is the most important thing a husband can give to his wife. God requires it.” He twirled spaghetti around his fork and sauce spotted the tablecloth. “I think parents can choose a mate for their child with more wisdom. I see many happy marriages in Iran. My mother was not in love at the beginning, but my father is a good and faithful husband. Her love for him grew, and thirty-three years later they are still happy together.”

How refreshing to hear a man speak of devotion to a woman, and of love growing in a marriage. The men I’d dated squirmed when they heard the “m” word, and people in general mentioned “devotion” only when referring to saints or sports heroes.

I sipped the last of my soup. “You may be right. Perhaps it is a better system, but convincing American young people of that would be impossible. Besides, many girls these days are in no hurry to get married or have children.”

He leaned forward with a crinkled brow. “Why not? In Iran we have the greatest respect for a mother and wife. What career can compare to it?”

“Maybe not many in Iran. I’ve heard that women are only allowed to work as secretaries or teachers, or in other typically female jobs.”

Afshin threw his head back and laughed.

“*Where do you get these ideas?* A woman can be almost anything except a clergy person or a judge. Being a mother is still at the top of the list, but many girls today want to be scientists, doctors, or businesswomen.” He glanced away, then turned back to me with a quizzical look. “May I ask *you* something?”

I nodded, wondering what was coming.

“What happened to your husband?” he asked, his voice softening.

I was touched that he wanted to know.

David. My dearest David. The scene of that morning replayed in my mind’s eye.

*I’m preparing the children’s lunches for school when David pokes his head in the kitchen and says, “See you later, babe.” I hug him, and my cheek lingers in the warmth of his neck. Then he’s off to a prayer meeting with his friend Dick. I call David “the mobile minister.” He’s always ready to go help a person in need.*

*Greg, our fifteen year-old, had left for school a few minutes earlier.*

*I spread hummus and alfalfa sprouts inside two pitas and place one in each lunchbox. Cal and Beth still have forty-five minutes before their school bus picks them up at the end of the driveway.*

*A distant siren sounds. Cal rushes to the picture window, hoping to see a fire truck zoom by, but none does. After a few minutes he walks away, lips in a pout. Beth calls him into the family room to play.*

*I slide onto the built-in bench at the kitchen table, reach for the Bible, and begin reading chapter three in Romans. When I next check the clock, I call to the children, “The bus will be here in five minutes.” Beth moans. Even after two and a half months in first grade, she still wants to stay home with me. I open the door and, after kissing each of them goodbye, I notice turbulent gray clouds and a ground cover of red, orange, and yellow leaves.*

*Back inside I kneel next to the sofa and have just begun sorting a pile of magazines when a knock startles me. What on earth is David’s mom doing here? Even though she lives next door, she rarely drops in. She stands immobile, paler than I’ve ever seen her.*

*“What’s the matter, Mom?” I ask with concern, assuming something has happened to my father-in-law, who is eighty-one.*

*“You better sit down, honey,” she says as she takes my arm and leads me to the sofa.*

*I sit down, feeling ready for news about Grandpop. She slips an arm around me. “A policeman just came to tell us . . . David’s gone to heaven,” she says, her voice weak.*

*I gape at the clock—the strongest urge to slap the hands back runs through me. “David? No, it can’t be. He just left.”*

*In the distance her voice continues, “The police think that someone failed to make a stop, and David’s truck slammed into a telephone pole when he tried to avoid them. It happened just down the road.” She’s quiet for a moment. Then, without letting go of my hand, she stands. “Come,” she says. “Let’s go see Dad.”*

*Three days later I stand behind the pulpit of the church David and I have attended for eleven years. Greg, Cal, and Beth sit in the front pew between me and Grandmom and Grandpop. I can still hear Beth’s cry upon learning of David’s death, and an ache spreads through my chest. I haven’t seen Greg or Cal cry yet. They’re staring at the closed casket. How are they feeling? Our eyes meet, and they send me a pale smile. Behind them people are pressed into pews like participants at an old-fashioned revival meeting. In the back, the standing crowd overflows out the doors.*

*I’m amazed at my own calm. Will people think I didn’t love David? How appearances can lie. I open the thick, well-worn Bible to the book of Ephesians and read, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . so husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies.” I close the Bible. “This is how David loved me. I have been blessed.”*

*In the days that follow I don’t eat; I pick at food. I don’t go to sleep at bedtime; I stay up for hours after the children are in bed and read from The Prophet by Khalil Gibran. I read, “But if, in your fear, you would seek only love’s peace and love’s pleasure, then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and walk out of love’s threshing floor into the seasonless world, where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears.” I read it again and again, and pencil beneath it: I want to know ALL of love.*

“My husband?” My eyes focused back on Afshin. “David died sixteen years ago in a car accident.”

He shuddered and glanced away. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK,” I said, starting to put my hand on his arm, but catching myself. “David was a wonderful husband and . . . my best friend. His death was my worst fear coming to pass. Yet the way we lived prepared me to bear that loss. Knowing of his strong faith in God and an afterlife comforted me.” I took a deep breath. “I’ve always made the best of difficult situations. And of course, our three children kept me busy.”

“You have *three*?” His brow lifted.

I understood his surprise—he’d met only Beth, who still lived at home—although one would hardly know it since she was usually at work or hanging out at her boyfriend’s house.

“Yes, I also have one son, Calvin, who lives here in town, and another, Greg, in Florida.” I walked over to a collage of family photos on the wall. “This is Greg, the oldest, and here’s David. Greg’s a good blend of the two of us, with his fair features and curly hair.” I touched another picture. “Cal is now twenty-four, a year older than Beth.”

He came closer and examined the pictures.

“Calvin and Beth don’t resemble you.”

Indeed, their caramel complexions and straight black hair didn’t match my coloring. “That’s because we adopted them in Guatemala when they were babies.”

I pointed to a towheaded toddler, “That’s my grandson, Jacob.”

“What!” Afshin stepped back and scanned my face. “You don’t look old enough to have a grandson.”

His surprise pleased me, though I’d grown used to that reaction from people.

“I guess eating a good diet and exercising pay off,” I said, looking at him with a self-satisfied smile. “Well, I better get going. It’s time for my French group.”

“You speak French?” His eyes lit up. “It’s a beautiful language.”

“I grew up in Belgium, speaking French. And I used to teach it before I decided to become a nutritionist. At times I wish I’d stayed in teaching. I miss those summers off.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Nutrition seemed like a more practical field. In this country, people rarely use French, but everybody has to eat. I also thought I could help people more by being a nutritionist, since what we eat is extremely important to our health.”

“Do you think I eat well?” he asked, a glint in his eyes.

“Mostly. I never see you eat sweets, but you do drink a lot of Coke.” I tilted my head and peered at him from the corner of my eye.

“Oh, it tastes so delicious,” he said, stepping back toward the table and picking up his glass. He gulped down the rest with eyes closed, smiling his pleasure.

I raised my hand in a goodbye. “I better go or I’ll be late.”

As I pedaled my bicycle toward my French group with extra vigor, I smiled. My desire to learn about the real Iran would be fulfilled, and I wasn’t the only curious one.

Though my tenant didn't pepper me with questions about the U.S., he did ask a lot of questions—about me.