

# PROLOGUE

KHORRAMSHAHR, IRAN, MAY 1982—Crawling on my belly in the sand, I felt it before it happened: a low rumble like the moment before an earthquake, or maybe it was Satan himself howling from below. Then a massive boom and I was airborne. Grains of sand needled into my pores, and for the briefest moment, I was suspended above the battlefield. All sound stopped, all the shelling, all the screaming for Allah, all of it was silenced, and the orange flashes of mortar fire looked almost pretty in the darkness. Like candles flickering above the desert.

When I crashed back to earth, I had no more faith in anything. I didn't believe in God, in humanity or in Saddam's war. There was no time for such devotions, as blood seeped from my forehead and chest, and all around me men were being executed as they begged for their lives. There was only one truth left: I was going to rot in a mass grave with hundreds of other forgotten Iraqi soldiers.

It's true what they say about your whole life flashing by as you wait for death to come sit next to you. It happens fast, like Kodachrome slides snapping into view—all these images of yourself in moments of pure joy closed my eyes and saw my brothers and me climbing trees to pick dates. I felt my fingers close around the fur of our big German shepherd as we wrestled in the family courtyard, and heard my mother's voice singing from the kitchen. I tasted the falafel my sister and I fried in our restaurant, and I saw my fiancée's *abaya* fluttering in the wind as she held our newborn son. The last thing I saw was my family together celebrating the thirtieth birthday I would never have.

Then I felt a presence near me. I opened my eyes and saw a child

soldier pointing a rifle at my temple. He was so small that he had to roll up the sleeves and pant legs of his uniform. This Persian boy had been brainwashed to hate me. I spoke as softly as I could.

“Please,” I said, “I’m a Muslim, just like you.”

He backed up a step and cocked the rifle. He either couldn’t understand Arabic or he didn’t care to chat before pulling the trigger.

“Muslim! Muslim!” I pleaded.

The boy took aim.

I reached into my jacket pocket to show him my Koran, and the boy lunged, grabbing it from me. He rustled through the pages, stopping when he discovered the photo of my fiancée holding our baby. He studied the image, as if he recognized them. He glanced at me and back to the photo again. I think I saw him gently touch her face with his finger.

He snapped the book shut and turned toward me with an expression of utter blankness. I silently said good-bye to everyone I loved. Then the boy slid the Koran back into my pocket. He knelt down and gave me water from his canteen. Then he leaned in close and put his finger to his lips.

“Shhhhhh.”

ONE

# ZAHED

Most kids in Masjed Soleyman had bicycles, even the slum kids who lived on the ugly side of town inside crumbling mud houses all stacked on top of each other. But we lived in a real brick house with a corrugated tin roof built for the oil company workers, so I should have had a bicycle, at least. Your own set of wheels meant you always had a way to escape the kind of heat that sinks down into your bones. You could pedal away from the dusty roads to the relief of the Karun River, say, or up a red dirt path in the Zagros Mountains and look over practically all of western Iran to clear your head from the clang of too many neighbors stirring up trouble in everybody else's business.

But Baba said I didn't deserve a bicycle. I was not sure why, other than I sometimes got in trouble at school for shoving the boys or chasing the girls, but I thought it had to do with my ten brothers and sisters. My father could easily have bought one bike because he had money from his mechanic job at the British Petroleum company. But I suppose if Baba had bought me a bicycle, he'd have had to buy ten more, and he for sure couldn't afford that. He always reminded us how much it cost to put food in eleven mouths—twelve, if you counted Maman. Liquor made him more likely to demonstrate how bad our money problems were by shoving the person closest to him. So on the days he stopped for a drink on his way home from work, we all rushed to the dinner table in the

courtyard; no one wanted to be last and have to sit next to him.

Money troubles were the reason why, in our family, playing was a sin. As soon as my brothers and sisters and I could walk, Baba put a rag in our hands and gave us jobs in his garage. That's where he worked on cars for extra cash. It wasn't a real auto shop with a lift or anything, and he barely had any tools besides what anyone else would have in their house—pliers and scissors and screwdrivers and a hammer. But he managed with salvaged parts from junked cars and by borrowing a real tool when he could, so neighbors came to him because he charged less than real shops and he could get the work done fast because of his free labor force.

One day my job was to grind the valves on an eight-cylinder carburetor head. Baba handed me a stiff wire and a piece of thin plastic, and told me to cover the wire tip with the plastic and scrape the valves clean with it. Normally, this is done with a power tool, but we did everything by hand. Before me was a pile of thirty-two valves crusted with who knows how many years of calcium crud. Of all us kids I was the only one who really did want to be a mechanic, so before I was even old enough to work, I used to watch and memorize Baba's movements around a car. He taught me that when the valves get dirty, they don't form a tight seal in the carburetor, so the engine will leak.

"The customer is coming for his car this evening, so every valve needs to be smooth by the time I get home," he said.

The heat inside the garage was like a snake charmer, coaxing vapor out of the oil spills on the floor. The sweet smell of grease hung in the air and sweat trickled between my shoulder blades as I stared out the door at the neighborhood kids on their bicycles. I didn't need a thermometer to know it was the hottest day of the year so far; all I had to do was squint my eyes to see waves ripple up from the earth, making my friends look like they were pedaling underwater.

The gunk on the valve stems was stubborn, and I couldn't get all of it off. I turned the tubes over and over, working each one, and in no time I had the hands of an old person, full of cramps. I could tell by the sun that

half the afternoon was already gone and there was no way I would be able to finish by the time Baba returned. My only option was to use what little money I had from customer tips to hire some of the kids outside to help me. For the price of a *gaz* nougat candy each, I hired three helpers, but they were useless, wandering off when their hands started to ache. By the time Baba's shadow stretched from the doorway over to me, I had only cleaned half of the valves.

His dark eyes turned to pinpoints, and I could hear the breath coming out of his nose.

"This? This is it?"

"My hands hurt, Baba. And it's too hard with just this wire. I need a real tool."

He turned away from me and grabbed a grooved radiator belt from a peg in the wall.

"How about this tool?" he said, lifting it over his head.

At first I didn't understand what he meant. You can't clean a valve with a strip of rubber. Then he brought his arm down and the belt made a ripping noise through the air. When it laced across my back, it sounded like a wet fish slapping on the table. I inhaled sharply and for the first few seconds felt absolutely nothing, as if time had frozen in place. Then the pain, like a wolf scratching its claws across my back, woke my body, and a scream tore from my throat.

"Baba, no!"

"Is this tool good enough for you?"

I scrambled to my feet and ran for the door, but not fast enough. The belt sliced my back a second time. Baba followed me into the courtyard, his weapon a lasso now. The black loop whirled toward me again, and this time I reached for it, stopping it just before it lashed my head. I yanked back, and suddenly I was the one with the whip in my hands. I threw it with all my might onto the roof of the garage, out of his reach.

"You little . . ."

Baba ran toward me, and stupidly, I just stood there. When he kicked me square in the tailbone, the pain shot straight to my molars. I

crumpled to the ground, unable to hold myself up on legs that no longer had any sensation. I could hear my mother's screams, but it sounded like she was deep at the bottom of a well. Or maybe I was in the well and she was high above, screaming for someone to get me out, but there was nobody to hear her. She was so tiny, and Baba was mightier than Godzilla and John Wayne put together. He walked right past her and picked up a wooden four-by-four to finish me off.

As I closed my eyes to wait for the impact, I heard someone running and shouting. It was Mostafa, the truck driver who lived next door, who wrapped his muscled arms around my father.

"What are you doing? He's just a twelve-year-old kid!" Mostafa hollered.

"Teaching him to be a man," Baba panted.

By now a crowd of neighbors had gathered. The last thing I saw before everything went black was my friend Ghaffor, standing near the water tank, pretending not to look.

That night when Maman rolled out the sleeping cots, I took my usual place between my two older sisters but asked them to please sleep close like books on a shelf so I wouldn't roll onto my back. Every time my tailbone touched anything, it felt like I had been kicked again. Sleep wouldn't come. But then I was overtaken by a floating feeling like being in a boat. Somewhere on this journey to nowhere, a beautiful girl joined me. She had a pleated white dress, and her golden hair caught the moonbeams and turned them into diamonds.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"I don't need one," she said.

She reached for my hands, and I could feel a message in her fingertips, a promise that she would protect me. I told her my name was Zahed.

"I'd like to call you Dadna," I said.

She didn't answer; she kissed me on the forehead and flew away.

When the swelling and bruises had gone down enough that I looked mostly like myself again, I ventured outside. I wanted Ghaffor to tell me

what he had seen of the fight. I found him in his usual spot, sprawled out on a rug watching a Hollywood action movie on a TV that was buried in a cave of VHS tapes. Ghaffor was three years younger than me and still sucked his thumb. That was the only clean part of his body; the rest of him was always covered in a layer of dirt. Probably all that dust settled on him because he so rarely moved from his position in front of the TV's glow.

"You're not dead," he said, removing his thumb from his mouth.

"Maybe I'm back from the dead," I said, gingerly taking a seat next to him on the thick carpet. Ghaffor was adopted, and his new parents never hit him, not once. He didn't have to work on cars, and he knew all the names of the American celebrities because he studied movies all day. Ghaffor was smart; he had the kind of mind that could come up with ideas no one else had. From all those movies, he had learned many ways to kill someone and get away with it.

"The one who needs to be dead," I whispered, "is Baba."

He lowered his voice and looked at me sideways. His eyes were the color of honey.

"You can't kill anyone." He laughed. "You're too scrawny."

I stood in front of the TV so Ghaffor had to pay attention to me. I may have been small, but my mind was fierce, especially when I had decided to do something.

"What makes you think I won't steal a knife from the kitchen, wait until he falls asleep, and then stab him in the chest?"

"*Beee-cause* you are scrawny. And also, apparently, deaf and retarded."

I pounced on Ghaffor and we wrestled like tumbleweeds in a cowboy movie, rolling from wall to wall. I was about to win the match and force him to kiss my feet in apology, when he sank his teeth into my shoulder.

"Ow! That's not playing fair!" I shouted, hopping off him.

Ghaffor turned the TV volume up extra loud to hide our voices. Then he leaned in close and asked, "You really want to kill your dad?"

"God willing," I said, rubbing my shoulder.

“Scorpion tails boiled in his tea.”

The plan was so smart, so simple, that I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it. Scorpions were everywhere in Masjed Soleyman, hiding in the cracks of mud walls and holes in the ground. I nicked a pair of needle-nose pliers from Baba's workshop and spent the next couple days hunting at the dump pile. There was a curve in the road that was out of sight of the homes, and that's where people tossed all sorts of stuff they didn't want—old blankets and tires and rusty pieces of metal. The junk pile made for a nice, protected cave for scorpions, but when the sun went down and it started to cool down, the scorpions came skittering out to hunt. When the first black scorpion emerged, I clamped the pliers over its head and squeezed. When its body stopped moving and I was certain it was dead, I used the pliers to separate the tail, being careful not to touch it as I dropped it into a jar. After a couple hours, I had collected three tails. When I put them in boiling water, they came alive again, wriggling and bumping into each other, looking for their bodies. I added some tea, closed the lid, and let it stew.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes, but the wait seemed endless. I thought of all the things I didn't say when Baba hit me, how all of us were living in fear of him, and that as the oldest boy in the family, it was my job to do something. He was getting older, weaker, and one day I would be too big for him to push around anymore. But I couldn't wait any longer. I was going to save my whole family from this misery now, because I was braver than Baba could ever imagine. Once he was gone, we were going to be a happy family like Ghaffor's. I'd free all of us from work so we could watch movies and play after school like normal kids.

I lifted the lid off the teapot and wrinkled my nose. The tails had turned a milky white, and the tea was cloudy. I strained the brew into a cup, put in a lump of sugar to mask any strange taste, and dumped the tails behind the fence. I arranged the pot and teacup on a tray, next to a small plate with sugar cubes, and delivered it like an English butler to my father as he bent over the open hood of a car. He stood up when he heard me approach and wiped his hands on a rag. His shoulders relaxed

when he saw me with what he thought was a peace offering.

“Ah, I see you are ready to learn the proper way to grind a valve,” he said, blowing his nose into the greasy rag.

He took one sip of the tea and frowned. “Tastes bad,” he said, setting it down.

“Try more sugar,” I suggested, dropping in another piece.

He swallowed a few more times and then returned the cup with a little bit of tea left in the bottom. “Still don’t like it.”

Baba turned his attention back to the car. I watched him tinker for a few minutes, and eventually he dropped his wrench. He cursed, bent over to pick it up, and then lost his balance, grabbing the bumper to break his fall. He swore again, and then put both hands on the engine to steady himself. Until this moment, my murder plan had been just a fantasy, like one of Ghaffor’s movies. I didn’t really think it would work, but fighting back against evil made me feel so good, like a super hero, that I didn’t give much thought to what would happen if Baba actually died. But now that it was real, I wanted to rewind the tape. I needed more time to think about this. All of a sudden I could see there was a world of difference between being angry and being a murderer. When Baba turned to face me, his cheeks were an ashy color, like the tea, and he was sweating. He opened his mouth to say something, then collapsed. I screamed and ran to get Ghaffor.

“I changed my mind! Come quick, I changed my mind!”

Ghaffor and I raced to Baba’s side, and Ghaffor put his ear to Baba’s chest. Baba’s breath was coming out in little wheezes, like it did when he was sleeping off too many beers.

“He’s not dead yet.”

I wanted to take everything back. Saving him would mean more beatings, but letting him die would mean my brothers and sisters would have no one to take care of them. I might not like Baba, but maybe some of my siblings did. It wasn’t right for me to make this choice for them.

“What am I going to do?”

“Go get your mother,” Ghaffor said.

“Are you crazy? Tell her that I poisoned Baba?”

“No, stupid. You leave that part out. Tell her he got bit by a scorpion. Hurry.”

We were lucky that the hospital was only a five-minute drive away, because the doctor said Baba could have died if we'd waited much longer. They gave him medicine that stopped the venom, and he had to stay in the hospital for a month while they changed all his blood. While he was recovering, I would steal away to the top of the hill behind our house, where I had found a den dug by stray dogs. I crawled down into the dirt hole and cried as loud as I wanted, asking Baba to forgive me for my wickedness. I still didn't like Baba, but I liked the idea of being a boy without a father even less.

I tried to be good after that. At school, I stopped pulling the girls' hair so much and tried to pay more attention in class. When I raised my hand to answer the teacher's question once, she looked stunned, as if I had suddenly turned into a chicken.

One day my class let out early after morning tests, and as I neared the house, I saw Baba scurry out of the storage shed and into his car, the tires kicking up pebbles as he stepped on the gas. I crept into the shed to see if I could tell what he had been doing. I scanned the shelves and my gaze stopped on the gramophone, with its brass speaker shaped like a trumpet. It had been moved from its usual spot two shelves lower. Upon further examination, I saw that the screws holding it together were loose—another sign that some guiding force was directing me to take it apart.

Inside was more money than I had ever seen, a pile of purple bills—rials—with the face of Mohammad Reza Shah and his father on them. Each rial note was worth about one and a half American dollars. And there were more than I could count, maybe more than a thousand of them. Underneath the bills I found gold rings, a watch, and a fistful of coins. My mouth watered at the idea of finally being able to buy sugar crystal candy sticks after school with the other kids. But if I took too much, Baba would surely notice, so I just took one bill. I put everything

back just as it was, stashed the money in my pocket, and walked toward town, my brain beginning to work on the delicious problem of how to spend it.

I knew I couldn't buy myself a gift, because as soon as anything new came into the house, the whole family had to inspect and discuss it. I needed a temporary luxury. I wandered with the bounce of freedom in my stride until I reached the cinema, where I stopped in front of a movie poster. They were showing *Sholay*, the Indian action film about a sheriff who seeks revenge against the bandit who murdered his family by hiring two petty criminals to kill him.

"I heard the girl in that movie does a belly dance."

I turned around and saw Ali, my friend from school.

"Oh yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah. She does it barefoot. On broken glass."

She was on the poster: A dark-haired beauty with her hands crossed above her head and dozens of bracelets tracing her arms. She was flanked by the two heroes, one in a white suit and the other in a black muscle T-shirt, both brandishing rifles. Behind them was a wall of roaring orange flames.

I peeled the bill from my front pocket and let Ali get a good, long look. "You coming inside?" I asked.

After purchasing our tickets, we strode to the snack counter.

"Give us four shawarmas and four Coca-Colas," I said, acting like I said these sorts of things all the time. It was a little disappointing when the clerk didn't even blink.

We went to our seats, and I sank back into the seat cushions and inhaled the steam coming off our lamb sandwiches, letting the cinema lull me with color and music and the promise that for the next three hours, I was a boy with zero problems. After the first showing, we hid in the bathroom and returned to the theater to watch it again. Right in the middle of one of the best scenes, the gunfight on top of a moving train, the volume suddenly went up and the gunfire got louder. I looked at Ali to see if he had noticed anything, but he was absorbed in the shootout.

“Did you feel that?” I asked.

“What?”

“My seat. It’s shaking.”

Suddenly a slice of yellow light interrupted the dark of the theater, and everyone started shouting at once and running for the doors. Ali and I ran with the crowd, gathering more runners as we went. I heard someone say that the Iraqi planes had been aiming for the oil refinery but missed and hit my elementary school next door instead. Parents called out the names of their children as they ran, and begged Allah to spare them. It was about three in the afternoon, and school was already out for the day, but often kids stayed to do homework or play soccer. Was there a soccer match today? I tried to remember, but my mind wasn’t working. In my panic, I couldn’t even recall what day of the week it was.

We made it to the edge of the soccer field, and then we saw it. From this distance it looked like ants were crawling over a burning hill, there were so many people running in all directions. My school was smashed, with flames shooting out of it. Some kids were rolling on the ground to get the fire off them; others were walking around dazed. I looked closer and saw that some of my classmates would never be getting up off the ground again.

The Iraqis had been dropping bombs on Masjed Soleyman for about a year, and I was getting used to seeing buildings broken into pieces, hearing the ambulances and the women wailing. I had learned to step around puddles of blood. But now it seemed as if Saddam Hussein was aiming his guns right at me.

“A curse on you and all the Arabs!” I shouted.

Ali tugged at my elbow and said, “C’mon, let’s go home. Your curses won’t help anybody.”

I ran to my street and was relieved to find Ghaffor and Mostafa’s son Omid out on their bicycles. Maman saw me first, and she came running out the door and collected me in her arms, as if I was a baby. I tried to squirm out, not wanting my friends to see her smoothing my hair and kissing me on the cheeks. But I’m embarrassed to say that I almost started crying with her. Something about being held that way made me

think of how easily it could have been my body that was blown apart. Some of my classmates would never feel their mother's breath on their faces again. I stopped wriggling and let myself go limp into the softness of her embrace. For the briefest of moments, my racing brain paused.

"Thank you, blessed Allah, you are safe," she said, whisking me into the house. "We were so worried; we looked for you at the school. Where *were* you?"

She set me down, and the coins jangled in my pants pocket. In the panic of the afternoon, I'd forgotten to get rid of the evidence.

"I was j-just out walking," I stammered.

"Well, go wash up. Dinner is almost ready. We're all accounted for, so we might as well eat."

Baba gave me a look that let me know I'd hear more about this later, and gestured for me to sit down. Maman poured me a glass of *doogh*, and the carbonated water and yogurt soothed my throat, which was dry from sprinting home. She set a plate of lamb, grilled tomatoes, and rice before me, and I pretended I was ravenous. My sister Leyla eyed me suspiciously, the beginnings of a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"So, Zahed, if you weren't in school today, where were you living it up?" she asked.

"Swallow your tongue!" Maman hissed.

But Leyla wouldn't let it go.

"I'm surprised you still have an appetite, after eating so much at the cinema," Leyla said, her eyes triumphant. The neighborhood kids must have told her already, and she was obviously jealous that I hadn't invited her. You could never keep a secret in Masjed Soleyman, not even if you tied a rock to it and threw it deep into the bottom of the Karun River. I shot her hot daggers with my eyes.

Before I could stop her, Leyla reached into my pants pocket and tossed the coins I'd stolen on the table. They landed with a sickening clunk.

Baba jumped to his feet and slapped me, and my fork went flying. At the same instant, I wet my pants.

“Tell me where this came from, right now,” he boomed. “And if you lie, I’ll brand you.”

I pleaded with my eyes to Maman, but to her, thieves were lower than worms.

“Did you hear that?” she shouted. “We’ll brand you!”

I opened my mouth . . . and lied. It was the weakest, most half-hearted, unoriginal thing I could muster: “Leyla is lying.”

I felt myself being dragged to the kitchen by the back of my shirt and heard the gas stove ignite. While Baba held me down, he ordered Maman to bring him a kebab skewer. He held it in the flame until it glowed red, as I thrashed, trying to break free. But I was a fly caught in a jar, frantically slamming into the glass with no chance of escape.

“You stupid idiot! You think you can lie to me? Where did you steal this? You know what happens to thieves? They get their hands cut off!”

I screamed as he brought the skewer toward me and Maman begged him to stop, but Baba was so mad his ears had shut down. The burn was coming, I knew that, so I covered my face with my hands and clenched my teeth. Then I heard the sizzle and felt a sharp sting on the outside of my left ankle, and I let out a howl like a desert jackal’s. That’s the last thing I remember—that my voice sounded not like mine but like an animal’s.

When I awoke, I was in a strange bed. Not a hospital bed, but someone else’s. I stood on my good foot and hopped over to the wall to look at the framed photos. I was in our neighbor Mostafa’s house. I hopped back to bed and passed out from the pain. I don’t know how long I was asleep—minutes, days, weeks—when the door jostled and I ducked under the covers, terrified it might be Baba.

“Zahed.”

A woman’s voice. I peeked out to find Mostafa’s wife, Fatemah, and Omid with a tray of food. The kindness made me embarrassed, and my tears came before I could hide them.

“You did a bad thing, but your mother and father did something worse,” she said, laying a warm hand on my shoulder. “Your parents and I have discussed it, and we think you should live with us for a while.”

She was pretty, like Raquel Welch times a thousand. My mouth was so dry, but I managed a raspy “Thank you.” My wish to be safe was stronger than my wish not to be pitied. Omid stayed behind as I nibbled at the rice.

“That was stupid to steal from your father,” he said. I shrugged my shoulders. There was nothing to say, anyway. Everyone knew what went on in my house. I gave up on the rice, and Omid took my tray and then turned back in the doorway. “Don’t worry. If you are lonely, tell me, and I will bring my mattress and sleep in this room with you.”

When my foot eventually healed, Mostafa asked if I’d like to help him make deliveries in his truck. School was still closed because of the bombing, so I had nothing better to do. His trips sometimes were as long as three weeks, hauling produce and construction supplies between the ports and the major cities. I always wondered what adventures he was having on the road in his red Mack truck and what it would be like to sleep in the bunk beds in the cabin behind the driver’s seat. I could hear that truck’s rumble coming from way down the street, and loved watching Mostafa part the sea of kids with it, its radiator grille gleaming like shark teeth.

Mostafa tugged at his mustache as he waited for me to speak. He had tanned skin and a rough beard, yet eyes that were kind and welcoming. He kept his hair long, and started each morning before the mirror carefully combing it to the side with oil that smelled like mangoes. I always thought he would make a good judge, because he had a face that people automatically trusted. I told him that I wanted to see what there was in the world beyond Masjed Soleyman. That I would do anything to put distance between my father and me.

We left the next day for Bandar Abbas, a port city on the Strait of Hormuz, fourteen hours away. We stopped in several cities along the way to pick up and deliver water pipes and concrete and shipping containers. My job was to help Mostafa tie our cargo down with straps, to change the cassette tapes, and to fry onions and meat on a camp stove propped between my feet on the passenger side. That first night, after I

ran out of jobs and darkness took away the view, I lulled myself to sleep watching a silver necklace with the word *Allah* sway from the rearview mirror. I only woke when the truck grumbled to a halt. When I opened my eyes, Mostafa was pouring bottled water over his face, arms, and feet and scrubbing with a towel.

“Where are we?”

“Time to pray,” he said.

“What?”

He went to the sleeping cabin and unrolled a small rectangular carpet, kneeled down on it, and indicated for me to do the same next to him.

“That’s the doorway to Allah’s house in Mecca,” he said, pointing to an archway woven into the silk fibers. “Your head goes there.”

“That’s OK; you go ahead,” I said. I watched him recite Arabic verses from the Koran and kneel forward, placing his head on a small, round piece of clay. We had never prayed in my house, and I didn’t understand a word he was saying, but whatever he was doing, he looked like he really meant it. In the distance, I heard a wolf howl. The night was so, so black, and I said my own secret prayer for Mostafa to hurry up so we could get back on the road. My prayer was answered in about ten minutes.

“Talk to me so I can stay awake,” Mostafa said as he accelerated through the gears.

“OK,” I said, but I couldn’t think of a thing to say. Instead I just fiddled with my slingshot. “Why do you pray like that?” I asked finally.

“I was not always a good Muslim, Zahed.”

“Mmmm?”

“I was a man without God. So I know things that, if I tell you, will save you a lot of trouble. Listen to me; I never want to see you smoking, doing drugs, or gambling. I do not want you to do anything wrong, so you must pray.”

I wasn’t so sure about religion, but I respected Mostafa. He bought me clothes and shoes. And he gave me a small salary for helping him with deliveries. He treated me like a son, so I listened to his stories from the Koran and from the Bible. Mostly they were boring, but I did like

the ones about the Prophet Solomon because that guy could speak to animals and control the wind.

“Zahed, if somebody steals from you, you should forgive them because they might have been in need. If so meone speaks behind y our back, say nothing because you must be the bigger person. When you fall in love, give all your heart to your beloved and don’t ever doubt.”

Maybe he was trying to tell me that he understood why I stole from Baba. I wasn’t sure, but I nodded anyway.

“But if someone hurts your feelings intentionally, be merciless!” he said.

“Merciless!” I shouted, pulling the rubber back on my slingshot and pretending to aim at his temple. In one swift move he whisked my weapon from my grasp and hid it under his enormous thigh.

“Be careful with that thing,” he said.

Over the next year, I watched him pray several times a day. I wasn’t sure if I would keep my promise to pray, but I was certain of this: I felt happy with Mostafa and wanted to be with him. And where else was I going to go? It didn’t look like my school was coming back anytime soon, unless you counted the tent where students were now supposed to pick up math and grammar worksheets and do them on their own. No classmates I knew even bothered. My life was better now, traveling with Mostafa, but how much longer could I keep saying thank you—for the meals, for the clothes, and for the lessons from the Koran? Eventually I would need a future that was my own. How would I ever become a man if I was always somebody’s sidekick?

One day our route took us to a military camp near Darkhovin, close to the Iran-Iraq border, where soldiers were fighting. I still didn’t understand why Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini had started the war almost eighteen months before. Khomeini said we were in a jihad against Iraq to save Islam, but I didn’t have much use for a holy war. The battle was something adults talked about into the night, but to me it was something out there, something make-believe, like *Sholay*. Now I was going to see it for myself. We were going to visit a real battle zone

to deliver produce and bullets to the Basij, a militia of volunteer boy soldiers, some of whom were thirteen, the same age as me.

I had no idea they'd be carrying Kalashnikovs, semiautomatic pistols, and even machine guns, but there they were, walking as casually as if they were carrying a book. I felt like a little boy next to them. They had hard jaws already, but when one looked me in the eye as I handed him a box of ammunition, I tried to start a conversation by asking his name.

"What do you want from me?" he replied. His voice was fast and direct, like a boxer landing punches.

"How did you come to the front?" I asked.

"I forged a permission letter from my father."

"That's it?"

He nodded.

"In the village, I was nothing. This," he said, sweeping his hand over the cluster of barracks encircled by barbed wire, "this is where my life finally started."

I couldn't get that soldier out of my mind after that. It took Mostafa and me almost a week to get back, and when we finally reached the house, I practically flung myself out of the passenger-side door. Omid was eagerly awaiting my report from the front lines. I told him about the rows of tents and campfires, the hundreds of boys who already had muscles and mean stares, and described the guns in fearsome detail. For good measure, I threw in a few explosions that didn't actually happen.

His eyes widened, and he admitted that he already had a secret plan to run away and join the Basij. It was all I needed to hear. I leaned toward Omid and lowered my voice: "Why don't we leave tomorrow?"