



A
NOVEL

The Lion Women of Tehran

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AUTHOR OF THE STATIONERY SHOP

“Heartbreaking and life-affirming.”

—ADRIENNE BRODEUR, *New York Times* bestselling author

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THE LION
WOMEN
OF
TEHRAN

Marjan Kamali



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Dedicated to the brave women of Iran

When my life was no longer anything,
Nothing but the tick-tock of a wall clock,
I discovered that I must,
That I absolutely had to
Love madly.

Forugh Farrokhzad, *The Window*

Ocean waves begin their journey thousands of miles out at sea. Their form, size, and shape come from the speed of prevailing winds in the atmosphere, the power of currents hidden beneath the sea, and their “long fetch”—the distance between a wave’s point of origin and its point of arrival... Events that seem to appear in the present from out of nowhere in actuality have a long history behind them.

George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*

Part One

ONE

December 1981

I stood on the lacquered floor—a small woman in black with a rectangular name badge on my chest. My coiffed, contented look was calculated so I'd appear not just satisfied but quietly superior. In America, I'd learned the secret to being a successful salesperson was to act like one of the elite, as if spritzing perfume on customers' blue-veined wrists were doing them a favor.

A sea of haughty New Yorkers swerved to avoid my spray. Thank God for the more down-to-earth women—the cooks and bakers coming up to the first floor from the basement home goods section—they were too polite to reject the fragrant droplets I offered. Orange, lily, jasmine, and rose notes nestled in the lines of my palms and the fibers of my clothes.

“Look at you, Ellie! Soon you'll take over this whole brand. I better watch my back!” My friend and coworker Angela, returning from her cigarette break, sidled up and whispered in my ear. The scent of her Hubba Bubba gum couldn't hide the smoke on her breath.

I shivered at the reek of tobacco. The bitter, sour notes would forever remind me of one long-ago night in Iran. The night when an act of betrayal changed the entire course of my friendship with Homa and both of our lives.

From the moment I'd read Homa's letter last night, I'd been a wreck.

I batted away Angela's compliments, said I wasn't doing all that well, really, and that I had a headache because I hadn't eaten all day.

“*I just might faint,*” I added with a touch of melodrama.

It was a relief when Angela was whisked away by a needy customer.

My mother always said the envy of others invites the evil eye to cast doom on us. She'd often told me that being perceived as too competent, happy, or successful could summon misfortune. I knew belief in the powers of other

people's jealousy and the jinxing of an evil eye needed to be cast off. But at the age of thirty-eight, in the middle of that massive Manhattan department store, I was still unwittingly beholden to superstition.

The truth of who I was could not be escaped. Nor could the flaw I had spent years trying to quash and erase.

The guilty one had always been me.

Earlier that morning, in our apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, my husband, Mehrdad, had tried to comfort me with breakfast. He prepared toast with feta cheese and cherry jam. He brewed bergamot tea. But I couldn't eat or drink. The jam was made from Homa's recipe. The bergamot tea in the white teapot adorned with two pink roses reminded me of her. With the arrival of her letter, her absence dominated my life all over again.

When I had first seen the red-and-blue-bordered airmail envelope, I'd assumed it was from Mother and would contain the usual mix of laments and updates about the dangerous political situation in Iran. I knew those letters were probably opened and read by regime forces, but my mother often didn't care and wrote bluntly: *Aren't you lucky, Ellie? You left and escaped the violent demonstrations and deafening riots. You skipped our country's slide back into medieval times. Women have lost decades, no, centuries, of rights in this country. I'm glad you're sitting comfortably with your professor husband in America. Thank goodness you got out!*

But when I pulled the onionskin paper from the envelope and unfolded it, my heart almost stopped. For there on the page was the unmistakable curlicue handwriting of my old friend, Homa.

As girls, we'd sat on the same elementary school bench in downtown Tehran. Together we scratched out hopscotch grids in our neighborhood alley and raced to school with satchels bouncing against our hips. With Homa, I had zigzagged through the mazes of the Grand Bazaar and shared ice cream sandwiches and dreams for the kind of women we'd become. In her stone kitchen, I learned to cook. With her hand in mine, I jumped over the largest bonfires. When we'd

hiked up Alborz Mountain and seen Tehran laid out beneath us, it felt like the world could be entirely ours.

Until one moment of striking carelessness ruined it all.

For the past seventeen years, we had been *ghaar*—purposefully estranged—with no contact save one unplanned encounter. Now her letter was in my hands. How did she know where to find me? She must have gotten my address from Mother.

One page of Homa's letter was filled with questions about my life in America. And another was about her situation in Iran. Her health was good (*pressure in the sinuses but nothing more*), the weather (*cold and yet delicious in the mountains—remember the teahouse we went to?*) was fitting for the season, her job as a teacher kept her busy. But her mind was not at ease (*You wouldn't recognize this country, Ellie. I don't know where we went wrong*). At the bottom was a sentence about Bahar, her daughter, and how she loved to sing. She closed the letter with *Can you call me, Ellie? Please. My number is 272963. I need to speak to you. It's urgent.*

After I told Mehrdad about the letter, he held me close and said gently, "It's good she's reached out. You were the best of friends. Time to air it all out, Ellie. Speak to her."

How I wish it were so simple.

I couldn't blame Homa for cutting contact. But now she had flown back into my life all innocence and zest, creating a crater of questions with her sign-off. *It's urgent.*

At the end of my shift, I removed my name pin, put it in the counter drawer, then pulled on my warm camel coat and striped leg warmers.

As I rushed outside toward the subway station, the cold December air carried the scent of roasted nuts from food carts and diesel fumes from hissing city buses. Large-bellied, tired-looking men dressed as Santa Claus rang bells, pointing to their kettle buckets and shouting, "Merry Christmas!" Gold and silver tinsel framed the insides of shop windows and trees with shiny ornaments

winked behind glass displays. There was a chill in the air that made my breath float in visible rings.

The words in Homa's letter ran through my head. Suddenly a taxi swerved far too close to me and honked loudly. My heart fell as I remembered another time a car had almost hit me. But this time, the only damage done was sludgy puddle water soaking through my leg warmers.

A neon pizza sign flashed red and yellow close to the subway entrance. I got giddy at the thought of a slice.

Since arriving in New York almost four and a half years ago, I'd strolled through Central Park, visited museums filled with global art, and dined in a few fancy restaurants. But no cultural experience topped eating a salty, cheesy, hot slice of New York pizza. Every pizzeria seemed to be in on the secret recipe for tangy tomato sauce and a perfectly foldable crust.

I looked at my wristwatch. No point in getting into the train hungry and drained of energy. I slipped into the pizza place and waited in line to order. After paying my seventy-five cents, I walked out with a cheese slice snug in a triangular cardboard box. I opened the box to take my first bite.

I heard her before I saw her. She moaned rhythmically as though in pain. Under the dim light of the streetlamp near the subway station, I made her out: an old woman huddled against the lamppost, two plastic bags on her feet, a flowered headscarf barely covering her hair. In between moans she asked unresponsive passersby in a weak voice on mechanical repeat: "Madam, can you spare a dime? Mister, can you spare a nickel?"

I wanted to get to my train. Get home. I needed to think, to decide whether I would call my old friend. But how could I ignore this woman? I went to her and stooped down. She smiled, and I was surprised to see straight and perfect teeth. The old woman held my gaze. Her eyes were watery and opaque-looking. She shrugged slightly. In that small movement, I detected a silent acknowledgment of the randomness of the wheel of fortune.

I handed her my triangular cardboard box—the pizza in it still hot and untouched. From my bag, I found the kiss-lock purse Mother had given me as a child in Iran, opened it, and took out all the coins and a few scrunched-up bills. American money still appeared strange to me: so green and thick compared to

our bills back home. The lady took the pizza, coins, and bills I offered with a look of bewilderment.

I got up and walked away. As I descended the subway station steps, I turned around only once.

She was eating the pizza quickly—her face an expression of complete relief.

When the train rushed into the tunnel and screeched to a stop, we all jostled and hustled to get inside. The crowded subway car smelled of urine and damp wool. Thankfully, I got a seat. Wedged between strangers, I was grateful for the anonymity. Not one person in that dirty, busy, fascinating, energetic, depressing, alluring city knew about my past or the guilt and regret that swallowed me whole.

The train lurched and blasted forward. Someone by the door sneezed and a gentleman in a baseball cap hummed a tune that was strangely cheerful.

I closed my eyes. I remembered all of it—every single bit. Those days of connection and chaos that had shaped our friendship could never be forgotten.

TWO

Spring and Summer 1950

“You can’t expect me to work, Ellie,” my mother said, using my nickname. “The descendant of royalty should not touch a thing to make a wage.”

Mother’s biggest source of pride was that she was descended from kings and queens. She constantly told me how her grandmother was the daughter of a Qajar king. That she had named me Elaheh because it meant “goddess,” because we were royals, and she was desperate to ensure our superiority did not go ignored.

Of our life in the big house uptown, I have only a few memories. I remember falling asleep to the sound of my parents’ arguing in the next room. I remember my father’s thick-browed, good-natured face and his musky scent and the deep timbre of his voice as he recited ancient poetry. He called me “Elaheh Jaaan,” drawing out the term of endearment “Jan” after my first name, and sometimes “Elaheh Joon,” using the more informal version of the word for “dear.”

He passed away on a spring day in 1950, just after my seventh birthday.

There were no other siblings to mourn him. As I got older, I assumed one or two may have come before or after me and perhaps been lost to the many ills and vices that back then frequently swallowed up newborns and infants. But before my parents could try again to bring another child into the world—one who’d survive like I had—tuberculosis infested my father’s body. He was laid to rest shrouded in white, buried nearby, hallowed in name.

To this day, sometimes when a man walks by, a musk-like scent jolts a memory of my *baba*. At his burial, I held his black lamb’s-wool hat and ran my fingers across the velvety, textured fur. Later that evening, my mother gave the hat away to a beggar on the street.

Growing up, I always wanted to know more about him, but Mother clamped down whenever his name came up and said it saddened her too much to remember his fate and the power of the evil eye.

Baba—dead so young—had only two brothers. One rode a horse to the Russian border, secured a bride there, then settled in the Baku region. The other brother, Uncle Massoud, took charge of our affairs and became our financial guardian, responsible for paying our rent and expenses.

After the funeral, Uncle Massoud came to see us with his own black lamb’s-wool hat in his hands. He said—very apologetically—that Mother and I would have to leave our big house, her home since she’d married at sixteen. My father hadn’t left much money behind, he explained gently. We’d have to move south to a small place he’d secured for the two of us in *payeen-e shahr*, the “bottom of the city.”

“Don’t give me that nonsense, Haji Massoud,” my mother said. “You just want me to...” She pulled me toward her protectively. Then she whispered to him, “How sad that you would punish me like this.”

Later, when I was alone (the servants were all asleep for the last hours before they would be sent packing), my mother came to say good night. For an Iranian family of that time, my mother’s was a small one. Her parents left no inheritance and her only sister passed away shortly before my father, adding to her grief and sense of being cursed by the evil eye.

Mother stroked my hair and promised me that our move downtown would be only temporary. She spoke about morals and decency and respect for widows and how Uncle Massoud had none of those qualities. Then she abruptly stopped stroking my hair and said Uncle Massoud wanted only one thing, but that she wouldn’t give it to him. I didn’t know what the one thing was, but I didn’t dare ask because Mother looked furious as she said it. The last thing I wanted was to trigger her mercurial temper.

The next morning, walking one last time through the house, Mother screamed about not wanting to leave her paintings behind, nor her lace, china, and French-style Louis IX chairs upholstered in damask. In the bedroom, I pulled on her legs as she hugged the fancy dresser. We entered the *andarun* inner rooms, and Mother cried for the children she said she could have birthed had my

father's destiny been different. In the *birooni* courtyard, where the garden was lush with shrubs of pink and red and white flowers, she cursed my uncle. I was surprised at how our garden could be so beautiful despite my father's absence.

My last glimpse of that life was a blurry, hazy image of the mansion, accompanied by the sound of my mother's sobs as we walked away.

The first night in our new place downtown, Mother and I rolled out the mattress on which we would now sleep together. She stared at the floor. "Ellie, did you ever think you'd live to see the day when your own mother, descendant of Naser al-Din Shah, would live in the slums?"

I was still trying to comprehend my father's death. "It was just a cold at first, wasn't it? The turmeric I dissolved in sweet tea for him should have warded off his fever. Why didn't it?"

"We were *cheshmed* and given the evil eye, Ellie Joon. We were cursed. That's all."

"I wish he was still here."

"Never underestimate the power of jealousy, Elaheh," Mother said, addressing me by my full name. "The eye of the Jealous can destroy happiness. All those who were envious of your father and me when we first married jinxed us with their evil, resentful thoughts."

Mother's words seemed deemed for a friend, or the sister she'd lost, not for me, a barely seven-year-old confidante.

"Madar, he was sick. I think it was the disease that killed him."

"Jealousy has powerful energy. It can swirl in the air and destruct true happiness. I know you don't believe me, Elaheh. But you will see."

I imagined clouds of evil envy energy circulating in the atmosphere. There was something wholly peculiar and frightening in accepting that others could have this power over us simply through their emotions. I had to rescue my mother from sinking even further into despair. "At least we have Uncle Massoud," I ventured.

As soon as I said it, I regretted it.

"Oh, please, don't talk to me about Uncle Massoud!" she said. "He could have let us remain uptown in our home. But I refused his conditions. Because I have standards. Because I won't... oh, never mind, Ellie. Never you mind. It's

just that we are stuck. My parents—God rest their souls—all their funds went dry during their lifetime thanks to others giving *them* the evil eye too! And your father's other brother galloped off to Russia. Now this one—your beloved uncle Massoud!—thinks he's doing us a favor by paying our rent in the slums. But it's his duty to provide for the widow and child of his dead brother." She looked around the bare room. "He won't even send for our old furniture."

I tried to think of something positive to say. "It's good Uncle Massoud won't send for our old furniture because it wouldn't fit here anyway."

My mother stared at me and burst into tears.

Uncle Massoud checked in on us and brought us meat and chicken and sweet *gaz* nougat. Even at age seven, I knew it was not unusual for a man to marry his dead brother's widow. Uncle Massoud was single—no one would have batted an eye if he'd married my mother, as a duty to his dead sibling, if nothing else. But Mother said it was beneath her to marry her husband's brother just for the sake of security. *I will not let that man so much as put a finger on me. I am not property to be passed on.*

Mother never forgave life for my father's fate.

Our private orb of grief was broken those first few weeks only by regular visits from Uncle Massoud and a few stubborn relatives. Mother had never been lighthearted, but after my father's "going," she told me it was too painful to be seen in the slum by family members who had once known our riches. Eventually, they stopped subjecting themselves to her rude and distant treatment.

Even as Uncle Massoud continued his visits, I began to think it was out of spite and anger at her refusal of him that he had us move from a high-walled mansion to a brick house in the slums. Then I began to notice the simple advantages of our tiny new place. We had two clean rooms and a street view. I could easily look out the window and see boys and girls playing right outside.

On the rare occasions we went out, Mother hissed at the neighborhood kids as she walked past. She lifted her long skirt and made her way around their gangling limbs as if to ward off risk of infection. "It's unbecoming," Mother

said. “Children in the streets. Look at them, throwing rocks and hopping like fools.”

I loved that our home was in an alley teeming with kids. I loved that in this part of town boys included girls in their games. That girls could even play outside.

But Mother said she would not have the descendant of the descendant of Naser al-Din Shah running around with *dabati*, “peasant-like” kids and screaming like a street urchin.

So, most afternoons, I stayed inside. I turned away from the window to sit with Mother and play with a cloth doll I had named Turnip.

At night, I lay on the mattress I shared with my mother and drew in my mind the perfect friend. She’d have dark brown hair. Kind eyes and a calm demeanor.

Months passed and our first summer downtown was ending. One afternoon, Mother asked for her tea as usual. I brought it to her with a chunk of sugar. She put the sugar between her teeth and sipped the amber brew, her face damp from the steam.

“Ellie,” she said, “I have registered you for school.”

As she spoke, telling me how hard it had been to register my name knowing it was a slum school in a slum neighborhood, but what could you expect when your father’s greedy brother wouldn’t pay for us to be in better straits, my body buzzed with a strange mixture of anticipation and excitement.

My fortunes had changed.

School. Real school. A whole building separate from Mother. A yard. Schools—I was pretty sure—had to have yards. Teachers. And—my heart beat faster at just the prospect—girls my own age!

I was petrified and electrified at the thought of this otherworldly portal. A world where I’d find—perhaps, perhaps—my dreamed-of, kind-eyed friend.

We’d meet on the very first day of school. Maybe outside in the yard. We might be shy at first, hesitating to introduce ourselves. But after the initial caution, we’d become fast friends. We’d do everything together. Play at recess and do homework (I was supremely excited about both prospects).

Mother had told Uncle Massoud to buy me notebooks and even two pencils. I would learn to write! In a real notebook with a sharp pencil. I had seen my

mother write—it was a constant heartbreak, she said, to be surrounded by illiterates in her new life when she was educated and had completed ninth grade.

Few things thrilled me more than the prospect of learning and finding a friend. I wanted to learn everything. I would become the best student the school had ever known. And we'd go everywhere together—my new friend and me. We'd play the five-stones game I'd seen the neighborhood girls play. Maybe Uncle Massoud would give me money for ice cream. If he knew I was doing well in school, if he knew I had a friend, he might treat me to that. As I lay next to Mother, I imagined bringing this imaginary friend to our house. My friend would make my mother laugh. We could eat together sometimes. I let my imagination soar with the delicious dishes we'd share.

I could not wait for the new universe that awaited when summer ended and autumn arrived.