

excerpt from

SONG of a CAPTIVE BIRD

A NOVEL

by Jasmin Darznik



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CHAPTER ONE

There's a street where
the boys who were once in love with me,
the boys with tousled hair and lanky legs,
still think about the innocent girl
who was carried away by the wind one night.

—from “Reborn”

IT WAS THE END OF MY GIRLHOOD, THOUGH I DIDN'T KNOW IT YET. IF I'D realized what would happen there, would I have followed my mother into that room in the Bottom of the City? If I'd guessed the purpose of our visit, would I have turned to run before my mother struck the brass knocker against the door? I doubt it. I was sixteen years old and by anyone's account already a troublemaker, but in those moments that my sister and I stood under the clear blue sky of Tehran's winter, I understood nothing about what would soon happen to me and I was much too frightened to break free.

My mother, sister, and I had set out from the house in the morning, wearing veils. This was strange and should have given me pause. My sister and I never wore veils, and the only time my

mother veiled herself was at home when she prayed. She had a light cotton veil—white with pale-pink rosebuds—she wore for her prayers. The garments she handed my sister Puran and me that day were altogether different: black, heavy chadors I usually only saw old women wear.

“Put them on,” she ordered.

We must be visiting a shrine to atone for my sins; this was the only explanation I could think of for why my mother insisted we cover ourselves up. I pulled the chador over my head and then stood studying my reflection. The girl in the mirror was thin, with pale skin and thick bangs that refused to lie flat under the veil.

I watched as Puran drew the garment over her head. She looked tiny with her body draped in the fabric and only a triangle open for her face. There were dark half-moons of sleeplessness under her eyes and, just beneath her left eye, a bruise.

So she’s been punished, too, I thought.

“Don’t step in the job!” my mother called out as my sister and I jumped clear of the icy waterways that ran down the center of the street. A few blocks from the house, we passed the first of many hawkers and peddlers. His two swaybacked donkeys were laden with pomegranates, melons, eggplants, and an assortment of crockery and cooking tools. When we neared Avenue Pahlavi, my mother hailed a droshky, a small horse-drawn buggy topped with a black canopy.

We made a tight fit, the three of us, pressed together in the back seat. My mother drew her veil across her face, then leaned

forward to speak to the driver. He looked at her curiously. "Are you sure you want to go there?" I heard him say. He looked very uncomfortable. "Begging your pardon, but it's no place for ladies such as yourself." My mother said something I couldn't hear. The driver tightened his necktie with one hand, took up his whip with the other, and with that the horse lurched into the street.

"Where are we going?" I whispered, nudging my sister gently a few times, but she wouldn't look at me. She just sank back farther into her seat, staring miserably at her hands.

It was morning, just after ten o'clock, and the streets were crowded with people, many of them women on their way to the bazaar for the day's provisions. At the bakery the line snaked around the building and into an alleyway. Men carried trays of flatbread on their heads; a boy hustled down the street with two huge earthenware jugs. We traveled in silence, turning off from the main thoroughfare and onto a street I didn't recognize. The wheels of the droshky creaked and groaned and all the landmarks I knew disappeared until nothing was familiar. After perhaps another mile or so, we eventually passed a railway station. Here the sharp clap of the horse's hooves against the concrete gave way to the soft thud of packed dirt, which was how I knew we were now in the southern section of Tehran, the city's poorest district.

The streets turned shabby and each corner we passed, each mosque, each row of houses and shops, seemed dingier than the one before. Whole families crowded around dung fires, rubbing their hands over the flames to keep warm. At the doors of a mosque, mothers stood with babies strapped to their chests,

begging for alms as their children played at their skirts. Men slumped along the walls of the houses, while older children milled about barefoot in the streets.

Beggars, puddles, rubbish, stray dogs—I couldn't tear my eyes from any of it. Nobody I knew ever came here. I wanted to see everything. I wanted to understand.

"Tsss!" my mother hissed. "Don't stare like that!" She tugged at me and pulled me back.

At an intersection, we came to an abrupt halt while a man led two donkeys through the street. All the houses had mud walls and sloping tin rooftops, and the roads were rutted with bumps. This area was called the Bottom of the City, but it wasn't until much later that I'd learn that name.

"Are you sure you'll be all right, madam?" said the driver when the buggy jerked to a stop. My mother seemed nervous, but she nodded and quietly handed him the fare.

As I stepped from the coach and into the lane, a strange odor assailed me—a mixture of mud, manure, and smoke. All at once I felt clammy and weak-kneed, and I reached for my sister's elbow to steady myself. From the end of an alley came the sharp barking of dogs, and black plumes rose from the rooftops, smudging the bright January sky.

I followed my mother and sister a few paces, then stopped and planted my hands on my waist. "Why are we here? Where are we going?" I asked.

"It's a clinic," my mother answered. She spoke quietly, and now she, too, avoided my eyes. "For God's sake, just hurry up."

I was still confused, but I relaxed a little. The pain in my arm had worsened in the night, and my lower lip was swollen and throbbing. I'd be grateful for some pills to ease the soreness.

I gathered my veil around me, clasped it more tightly under my chin, and then followed my mother and sister down the lane. When we reached the last building, my mother gripped the edge of her veil with her teeth to free her hands and reached for the brass knocker. She banged on the door. She banged again. After a moment it opened a crack.

The vestibule was full of women. They stood in pairs and in groups, older women and several very young ones, from one end of the wall to the other. They waited with their heads tipped down, biting their lips and staring at the floor. No one spoke.

A worn, faded carpet had been strung up from the ceiling as a makeshift partition between the vestibule and the rest of the building. After some minutes, a girl of sixteen or seventeen drew back the carpet and led us down the corridor and into a cramped chamber lit by two small kerosene lamps. The air inside was laced with a strong, bitter scent—ammonia, I guessed. I squinted and scanned the room. There was a square window set high up in the wall and barred with a metal grate. Against one wall stood a table draped with a white cotton sheet. I glimpsed a washbasin in the farthest corner, etched with brown lines. The walls were bare, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that on one side of the room a crack reached from the floor to the ceiling in a single long, jagged line.

I glanced at my sister, but she still wouldn't meet my eyes. Was it then, in that moment, that I began to understand why

we'd come to this place, or, rather, why I had been brought here? Perhaps—but by this time it was already too late. The door opened and a stout older woman entered. She had a sharp chin and she wore her hair parted in the middle and pulled into a low bun. She shut the door, issued a quick greeting, and looked from me to my sister and then to our mother.

“Which one?” she asked.

My mother nodded in my direction.

I watched helplessly as my mother and sister were ushered away. The younger woman stayed behind, standing with her arms clasped together in front of her. “Sit,” the older woman ordered once they'd left, motioning to the table. I obeyed.

“Take off your underpants and then lie down,” she said. With my mother and sister gone, her voice was suddenly harsh.

“My underpants?”

She nodded.

I shook my head. “I won't!”

The two women exchanged a look. That look—I'd never forget it and my own fear in witnessing it. I tried to stand, but before my feet reached the ground, the younger woman had already stepped forward. She was slight, slender as a reed, but her grip was astonishingly strong. She shoved me backward and, in what felt like a practiced gesture, jerked my legs up onto the table, dug her elbow into my chest, and cupped her hand firmly over my mouth.

“Lie still!” the older woman told me. She pushed up her sleeves and drew in a deep breath. She yanked my underpants down to my ankles and then placed one hand on each of my knees to force my legs open.

Whatever else I’d later forget about these next minutes, or only pretend to forget, I can say I fought her—and hard. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and kicked my legs, but the younger girl only bore deeper into my chest with one elbow and then cupped a hand over my mouth to stifle my screams, and the older one held me by my ankles.

“Lie still!” they told me, this time together.

Working quickly, the older woman forced my knees apart again, thrust two fingers inside me, and hooked them in the shape of a “C.” I jerked my legs back and kicked her, this time much harder. And that’s when it happened, in that instant when I tried to free myself. All of a sudden I felt a tearing pain, quick and deep, and I sucked in my breath.

The woman drew her fingers from me and wiped them briskly with a cloth. Something gave her pause, and a deep crease sprang up between her eyes. “You’re a stupid girl,” she said, looking into my eyes for the first time since she’d entered the room. “I told you to lie still, but you wouldn’t and now see what you’ve done.” She shook her head and then pitched the cloth into a wastebasket behind the table.

“The curtain of skin is intact,” she told my mother when she’d returned. “Your daughter is still a virgin.”

I held my breath, too scared to say a word.

“Thanks be to God,” my mother said, lifting her hands to the sky and murmuring a quick prayer. “And the certificate?”

“Of course,” the woman answered breezily as she made for the door. “I’ll sign it for you myself, khanoom.”

“I had no choice,” my sister sobbed afterward, when the others had left and it was just the two of us in the room. She buried her face in her hands. “Mother made me show her the letters Parviz wrote you. She turned up at the movie theater, you know, while you were alone with him. She must have guessed you were up to something, Forugh, because when we got home she made me do it. I had no choice, I swear. . . .”

She looked so pitiful with her tear-swollen eyes and her flushed cheeks. I could easily imagine how my mother had hounded her, and it made me miserable to see the bruise that had bloomed under her left eye since last night. I didn’t blame her for showing our mother my letters from Parviz, not really anyway, but on that day in the Bottom of the City I couldn’t muster a single word with which to answer my sister’s pleas for forgiveness. And I certainly couldn’t tell her this: When I stood to dress after the virginity test, my legs were shaking so hard and my head was so dizzy that I doubled over, and in that instant my eyes drifted to the wastebasket in the corner. What I saw there plunged my heart into my belly. A stripe of red on a white cotton cloth. My virginal blood.

For a long time I was afraid to tell anyone about what happened to me or even to let myself think about it at all, but I can tell you now that day was the end of my girlhood and the true beginning of my life. It always will be.

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