

The Cello Player

Chapter One

TEHRAN MARCH 2018

'*Sabzi! sabzi!*' The cries of Muhammed Reza, the local herb vendor, crept through the shopping quarter. He looked over at the music shop. Dariush's cello case reclined against the outside wall, its leather shell softened by the early morning sun. The carrying handle, rubbed to a shine over the years, hung limply off its side. A family of sparrows hopped and fluttered around it, but the shrieking of cars and motorbikes stifled their merry chirping.

The whiff of his emerald plants, piled high like a heap of gems, cut through the stench of exhaust fumes as he manoeuvred his wooden handcart. '*Sabzi!*' he bellowed louder and pushed his barrow of jewels further along, steadying it each time its wheels caught on the uneven sections of pavement. Muhammed Reza lowered his head and trudged further along the city street. Herbs had been his world since childhood. He was skilled at making a complete range of healing teas, tinctures, oxymels, plasters and salves. He knew off by heart the exact quantities and ratios for every ingredient that went into cough syrups, digestive tonics, and fertility aids. He could roll up tiny pills in fine silver leaf with the nimbleness of a seamstress and could crush stubborn roots and seeds with an oversize pestle and mortar.

Each day at first light, Muhammed Reza collected his herbs from the wholesaler, then wound his way through his regular route. He was a constant in this rapidly changing district. Stores closed. Stores modernised. New stores opened. Mobile phones and electronics. Computer games. Perfumeries. Exquisite confectionery and cakes for every occasion. He knew them all. But none of them knew him.

Muhammed Reza stopped his cart by the newest addition. A herbal medicine store. Its window display was minimalist to encourage shoppers to gaze directly inside and watch remedies being made to order. Muhammed Reza watched a shop assistant blend a herbal lotion in a mechanical dispenser. The black-and-white tiles behind her resembled a chessboard and almost camouflaged her as she stood in front of them in her black and white outfit. She turned the machine off, stroked a tissue over the jar to dab off the spills, then labelled it, packaged it in a neat little box and bound it with a sliver of white ribbon. The customer reached over the counter to claim her luxury item and dropped it into her snakeskin handbag. The assistant hurried across the shop floor to reach the door before the customer and hold it open for her. The older woman passed a blank gaze upon Muhammed Reza as she brushed past him. He let out a dismissive grunt. He knew she saw little more than an ageing barrow bow, but he could just as easily have made up the same potions, without the frills, fancy jars, and image, he thought to himself as he turned his face away from the early morning shopper. But nowadays it is all about packaging and presentation, he thought.

The herb seller looked down at his own products. Glossy spikes of tarragon, reeking of aniseed, had twisted their slender leaves through bunches of feathery coriander leaves

and overpowered their subtle citrus scent. Muhammed Reza lifted the pile of tarragon and placed it to the side of the barrow. A bunch of succulent, fat radish bulbs poked their bright red heads out at him. He tugged at them to bring them forward in the display. Muhammed Reza sniffed the thickly perfumed herbal air around his barrow. Just like an expensive perfume, the aroma had top notes, middle notes, and base notes. And he could identify them all. If anyone bothered to ask. But no one ever did. Just like no one ever asked advice on the healing temperaments of the herbs anymore. And his own melancholic temperament meant he lacked the motivation to tell them.

Muhammed Reza looked up from his cart. Across the road, Fereshteh was struggling to close the door of her drapery shop with one hand. She was clutching a tray tightly towards her stomach with her other hand. She tugged at the metal door several times until the lock clicked. A dusting of flour escaped from beneath the tea towel that was draped over the tray and settled in a striped pattern across her loose tunic. She held the tray closer to her belly and zigzagged her way across the road, flapping her free arm up and down like a wing to warn off the oncoming cars. Fereshteh spoke with her hands. She spoke with her body too. She hadn't always done. Muhammed Reza could still remember Fereshteh wrapping herself modestly in loose-flowing garments. Over the years he had watched her come up with novel ways to flaunt her amplexity. In today's creation, she had sewn in the body of her tunic to enhance the roundness of her breasts, and slitted each side to flatter the movement of her hips.

Fereshteh continued crossing the road at a slow pace, swaying slightly from side to side and making eye contact with the drivers. She held her shoulders back and moved forward confident of her own beauty. Dusty, smoke-spewing cars passed by. They weaved in and out of the lanes, overtaking and undertaking, using only their horns as signals and oblivious to red lights. Men and women, designer sunglasses balanced neatly on their youthful faces, sped by in their vehicles, holding the steering wheel with one hand and the latest model mobile phone with the other. The vehicles raced along, bonnet to back bumper, only a finger-space apart, so close that the drivers could read the dials on the dashboard of the car in front. Seatbelts flopped loosely by their shoulders causing their metal clips to tap against windows closed tight as barriers to the exhaust fumes.

Muhammed Reza screwed up his eyes at the March sun burning through the flimsy clouds, which hovered above overbearing apartment blocks, cafes and tightly hugging shops with creaking shutters. Opposite Baharestan Metro Station an enormous statue of Ayatollah Modarres, hand raised and outstretched, watched over the life-draining traffic that sped by. Across the street, a long courtyard paved with tiny stones meandered to the historic Masoudieh mansion building where ornate stone carvings of cherubs and angels refused to relinquish their place amongst the chaos of modern architecture around them. Stems of filigree dill nodded over the edge of Muhammed Reza's cart, their subtle bouquet almost lost amongst the barrow's potent cocktail. With the tenderness of a mother to her newborn, Muhammed Reza lifted the drooping stems and returned them gently to their place. He smiled remembering his mother chopping the herb at their kitchen table to make dill water for colic and digestive ills. All his customers had an interest in was using the herb to fill their bellies. They would scatter his feathery dill weed with broad beans, each of which had been painstakingly skinned, onto fluffy white rice to make *Baghali polo*.

A motor bike stacked with passengers clinging on like limpets, sped by him and then edged alongside Fereshteh, spraying her with dust. Fereshteh leaped over the wide

roadside ditch to reach the pavement, but not before darting a piercing look at the driver. She inspected her tray to check that its cloth was still protecting it, then dusted down her tunic with her free hand and walked over to Dariush's music shop. She shielded her eyes from the light with one of her hands and peeked through the metal shutters into the darkened guts of the shop. Muhammed Reza watched Fereshteh peering through the shop window and smiled to himself. He had witnessed Fereshteh flirting with Dariush on countless occasions and knew she was desperate for her regular morning chat with him. But, he also knew that as much as Fereshteh may hope, Dariush was not at all romantically interested in her.

Fereshteh's exuberance both amazed and intimidated Muhammed Reza in equal measures. She dyed her hair a yellow blonde, the colour of straw and wore it in waves that fell softly around her face. Her scarf had slipped backwards often enough for Muhammad Reza, and plenty of others, to see it. But her most striking feature was her smile. Fereshteh glossed her plump lips the colour of pomegranates. Lips that looked like they longed to be kissed again. When Fereshteh smiled, her face shone much younger than her 48 years, yet her eyes had kept a look of sadness.

Fereshteh stepped back from the window, walked down the tight alley by the side of the shop and turned the corner to the rear of the store. Muhammed Reza reached the front of the shop and saw her paused halfway down the narrow passageway where Dariush's cello case was leaning against the back wall of the music shop. She skirted around the case and rushed around to the back door of the shop. Muhammed Reza could hear her rattling the shutters. He parked his barrow by the cello case and walked around to the back of the store. Fereshteh was squinting through one of the narrow shutter gaps. Muhammed Reza tapped her on the shoulder. Fereshteh jolted her head back and slapped her hand against her chest.

'You scared me half to death!'

'Why? Guilty conscience? ', laughed Muhammed Reza.

Fereshteh breathed slowly and deeply twice to compose herself then brushed off his touch from her shoulder.

'Just trying to find out why he's not opened up yet, that's all.' Fereshteh answered.

'Shouldn't you have opened up yourself *khanum*?' asked Muhammad Reza?

'Well, yes, I should have, but' Fereshteh cocked her head to gesture at the tray she was still clenching tightly against her body. 'But, I just thought Dariush might enjoy these.'

The herb vendor lifted the corner of the chequered tea towel. The fragrance of freshly baked breakfast biscuits wafted over their heads.

'So what's he done to deserve these then?' he asked.

Fereshteh blushed. 'As if!' She pulled the trailing tail of her long headscarf over her mouth as she spoke to muffle her words and steadied the biscuits against her body.

'Don't go saying things like that. Someone might hear you! I could end up in all sorts of trouble if you start rumours like that.'

'*Khanum*, what you and *Agha* Dariush do is your own business.' Muhammed Reza still spoke with a laughing tone.

Fereshteh flicked her wrist dismissively at Muhammad Reza. 'Bah! Get away with you! With Dariush? He's a pussycat!'

'Yes, he is.' Muhammed Reza added quickly.

Muhammed Reza moved forward and pushed his face against the metal grid. He paused for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the unlit room. Violins dangled from hooks, lifeless, like innocent victims of the hangman's noose. On the opposite wall Italian mandolins puffed out their bowl-backed bellies, alongside traditional Persian *ouds* and *tars*. And in the centre of the shop, a pair of cellos stood tall and proud, guarding Dariush's musical empire. Muhammed Reza craned his neck to peer farther into the store, deep into its shadowy, hushed darkness. Cosying up to the side of the dark teak counter and its clunky cash register on the right, were two well-worn armchairs. He smiled and turned to Fereshteh.

'Well, the armchairs are still empty and waiting for your gossiping and biscuits. I wonder which he finds sweeter?'

Fereshteh did not respond, but bent forward to fasten up the lower buttons of her tunic she had left undone. The tray of biscuits tilted as she did so. Muhammed Reza stretched over to steady the baked treats and Fereshteh stepped backwards away from him.

'Thank you.' Fereshteh broke the awkward silence between them.

'Would you like to try one of my biscuits?'

Muhammed Reza slipped his hand under the cloth and plucked one out. Fereshteh stepped back quickly again, causing her blue silk scarf to slide backwards and exposing most of her hair. She balanced the tray of biscuits on a nearby wall while she turned her back to the herb seller, readjusted her head covering and refastened the knot under her chin.

'I wonder where early bird Dariush is today then?' Fereshteh asked taking a biscuit for herself. She took a bite, closed her eyes and relished the traces of cardamom and sugar dissolving on her tongue.

'Early bird? Thought you said he was a pussycat!' Muhammed Reza smirked at his own joke.

He clawed out his fingers from his cheeks like whiskers. 'Miaow. Miaow. Miaow'.

Muhammed Reza pointed at Dariush's shutters. 'Yes indeed, so where is *Agha* Dariush then?'

Breakfast biscuits in their hands, they both instinctively turned back to peer into the shop. The well-polished, antique oil-burning samovar waited patiently in the corner, but had not yet been lit to warm the little teapot sitting on its crown. Dariush liked tradition and craftsmanship, the old and archaic, things you could rely on. His was the only shop in the district that Muhammed Reza had ever been invited into. It had happened one winter morning, when Muhammed Reza had suddenly got caught in a snowstorm and Dariush insisted he come in. He had quickly covered his dried fruit and nuts with a large tarpaulin and pushed his barrow around to the back of the shop to park it where he and Fereshteh were now standing. As he entered through the back of the shop Dariush was already filling a

large jug at the deep porcelain sink in the narrow kitchenette. He ushered Muhammed Reza to the armchairs in the corner, lifted the lid off the samovar and poured water into its empty body.

Muhammed Reza had watched mesmerised as Dariush enacted an old ritual he had remembered his mother taking part in. Dariush carefully filled a small metal jug with paraffin, decanted it into the base, turned up the wick and lit it. No plugging in and turning on a switch for him. It was like his own private tea ceremony. Once the water had reached a boil, he lifted down his porcelain teapot from the shelf. Its white spout was tanned with decades of tea and it had a tiny chip that had worn smooth with years of use. Dariush tucked it under the samovar tap, opened it up and added a little of the scorching water then swished it around to heat the pot. Once he had tipped in some loose leaf tea and a couple of cardamom pods, he filled it with boiling water, settled the teapot on the top of the samovar and left it to brew. Once the tea was ready he poured a small amount into two small tea glasses, then filled them up to the rim with boiling water from the samovar's tap. Muhammed Reza had watched with awe as Dariush held the glass up before passing it to him, twisting it around in his hand like a connoisseur of wine, checking to see if he had achieved the optimal shade for perfect tasting tea. Muhammed Reza inhaled, trying to capture that distinct smell of paraffin, strong tea and cardamom. He heard a distinct inhaling of breath and turned to look at Fereshteh. He wondered if she was sharing a similar memory. She saw him looking at her.

'Did you see? The tea glasses are still there from yesterday?'

Muhammed Reza looked back in to the shop to where Fereshteh was pointing. A pair of small glasses and saucers stood on an etched metal tray, still unwashed.

'There's no sign of him is there?' added Fereshteh. 'Besides his cello case, at any rate.' Fereshteh added, pointing at the case leaning against the wall. Muhammed Reza snatched another biscuit and walked back down the side alley towards Dariush's cello case. Fereshteh followed him. He stared at the case and nibbled at his biscuit.

'Something's wrong isn't it?' asked Fereshteh. 'I mean, he wouldn't just leave his cello there would he? Besides the fact it's his pride and joy, it can't be cheap either can it?'

The herb seller popped the last of the biscuit into his mouth. 'Maybe you're right, but we can't go breaking down his shop door can we? He may have just stayed overnight somewhere. We don't have any genuine reason to worry yet do we?'

'And the cello? Explain why he would leave that here then?' insisted Fereshteh.

The two of them stared at the cello case in silence.

Fereshteh crouched down and examined the labels on the case; memorabilia of concerts and distant towns. Dariush had a story to tell for every place he had been and loved nothing more than to bring each place to life with his story-telling.

'It's definitely his cello case,' affirmed Fereshteh.

'Yes, unfortunately I think you're right. There's something not right. I can feel it. He never lets this beloved instrument of his out of his sight,' responded Muhammed Reza in an unusually gentle tone.

'True,' retorted Fereshteh. 'Invite Dariush for dinner and you can be sure he will bring his cello along as a chaperone.' She tried to laugh, but her voice trembled, making it sound more like a cry.

Muhammed Reza looked up. He was as much surprised that Fereshteh had admitted inviting Dariush to dinner as he was at the lone cello case.

'OK, I suppose you have a point. I mean, why on earth would he just dump it right there against the wall like that, where anyone could steal it?' sighed Muhammed Reza. 'I've never known him do that before. I suppose we should at least put it somewhere safe until he turns up.'

'We can put it behind my counter,' offered Fereshteh.

The herb seller bent slightly to lift the case, but could not move it.

'I can't shift the thing,' he grunted.

Fereshteh threw her hands up in exaggeration.

'For goodness' sake! the scrawniest musicians drag these things all over the place. You push that barrow around all day, you'd think you'd be able to lift this!'

He tried again, this time crouching further down to give himself some leverage.

'Well, I swear, I don't know how they manage it. Maybe I'm just getting old and past it.' He grabbed the handle on the side of the case and pulled harder. 'No, it's no good. It won't budge.'

Fereshteh helped Muhammed Reza to push the cello case down flat onto the pavement with a thump. She bowed over the cello. The sparrows took advantage of the lack of attention to the biscuits still balanced on the wall, poked their heads under the cloth and settled down to feast. The herb seller stooped down and released the brass clasps on the side of the case, flicking each one open with a loud, reverberating click. He raised the lid. Pale and expressionless, Muhammed Reza tried to warn Fereshteh to look away, but his voice hung there, captive within him. He saw her face crumple in horror and heard her scream slice through the small shopping district, shattering its familiar security.