



**THE OPIUM
PRINCE
JASMINE AIMAQ**

**SOHO
CRIME**

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PROLOGUE

THE GIRL LIES CRUMPLED AND STILL IN THE ROAD, LIKE A THING THROWN AWAY. IT CANNOT BE that I am the one who has done this to her. Just a moment ago, she ran across the road, lively, smiling, and quick. Beside me, my wife is screaming. I cannot move, but I do, my hands heavy as I take them from the steering wheel and step into the desolate road. My legs protest, but I walk. I fall to my knees and take the girl's hand. A small whimper. She is alive.

“Please, don't move. You're going to be all right.” My voice breaks, sounding alien, each word between a quiver and a sob. The girl's limbs are tangled, her head tilted at an impossible angle. A bruise blackens her neck. Her red dress grows darker, blood blooming through the cotton, which rises in the breeze and settles back onto her body a shroud.

The endless desert, the Afghan sun, the silent sky. They watch. The road is the only thing in motion. The asphalt ripples in the heat, as if ready to open up and engulf us, making the sands of Kabul Province our tomb. I stroke her hair as her pain threads its way into me. Into places I didn't know existed. I let out a sob, but it sounds far away.

As she tries to sit up, blood spills from her brow, streaming down her face and throat. Her bare feet are wrapped in a film of dust and sand. I try to steady myself, but my hand slips

in something greasy and slick, a rainbow of engine oil and blood. The asphalt buckles again.

“Where are your people?” I say. “Tell me. I’ll find help.” I squeeze her fingers gently, afraid to break another thing.

Her lips barely move when she asks, “Am I dying?”

“No. You’re going to be all right,” I lie.

She starts to speak. “Don’t talk anymore,” I beg, fearing the words will end her, take the last energy that could keep her alive. Where are her parents? Sewn on her dress are little round mirrors, and I see a hundred fractured close-ups of my face.

She struggles again to raise her head and say something. I cradle her in my slippery hand. In the car, the music plays on. Beethoven’s chords shred the air into shards. Rebecca is crying, fumbling at the buttons and dials in vain, plucking at the cassette that won’t stop.

With shocking force, the girl grasps my arm and hisses, “I’m only ten. Maybe nine. It’s not fair.” She tries to point to something. “My doll,” she says. Her eyes close.

“No. Stay awake, please. Please try. I’ll find help.” I say these words, but I understand for the first time what it means to be helpless. I hear what will be her last breath, air drawn in sharply as she dies. I watch her face for a single sign, wondering if maybe I believe in miracles after all. I swear to a god I don’t believe in that I will be faithful if he shows his power now, just this once. I will never ask for anything else.

I wish I could say that I didn’t see her at all. That she whipped into view from nowhere, an apparition out of the desert. But it isn’t true. I saw her, but only as a blur of color trailed by a playful tangle of long, dark hair. The music stops at last. Then Rebecca is there, bending over the sunbaked road. She has something in her hand: a yellow-haired doll with a mirror-dotted dress. Sweat and tears trickle from my face,

salting my lips. I gather the child in my arms and hold her close, rocking her back and forth. Her form is so small, bones hollow like a bird's. Still, her weight nearly breaks me. I must find her people. I rise, afraid I might drop her.

Rebecca insists she will go with me, her tears flecking the girl's feet, and I am a mere echo when I respond, *No. Please, wait in the car and lock the doors.* I have never been so alone, the gates in my mind clicking shut, walls closing in until everything is crushed but my unbreakable guilt. I look up. No clouds, no birds, no god. Only sun, hitting the desert like acid rain.

I walk in the middle of the road, counting my steps, turning the rhythm into a two-note lullaby. One-two. Three-four. In 108 steps I reach the steep incline in the road. I climb, knowing what I will find on the other side.

At the top of the hill, the desert stretches below me. There they are. I see hundreds, maybe thousands, of Kochi nomads in reds, greens, blues, and every tone of beige and gray. This is what infinity looks like. An undulating mass of men, women, children, animals, and tents against a wall of sky. I see rifles slung across men's backs, the glint of steely blades at their hips. *Fearless*, was how my father described them. *Fearless and proud.*

I have few memories of my mother, Dorothy, but one stabs into me now. I used to run to greet the nomad caravans when they came into town because I wanted to play with the children. My father told me they lived off the land and fought for what was theirs, that even their youngest were brave as lions, and I longed for adventures with six-year-old nomads in the desert. My American mother would stop me, my hand in her iron grip until my fingers hurt as she told me about their thousand-year-old laws, by which even unintentional sins could be capital crimes.

I try to forget her words as I start down the sloping highway. I cross the line where asphalt gives way to sand. It takes me eighteen steps to be noticed and thirty to reach the first goatskin tents. It must have taken the girl less than four running steps from the side of the road to the middle of it. I try to banish the image of that blur. But a child's voice whispers, *Look at me*, from the deepest recesses of my mind.

Kochis of every age assemble to take in the curious sight of us. For years, they will talk about the stranger who walked among them wearing city clothes and carrying a dead girl. I meet the gaze of an old man, his face a study in shadow, strands of gray escaping from his turban.

"Telaya," the man says, pointing to the girl. Then he asks, "What happened?"

I cannot say, "I found her like this. Someone must have hit her." There is no phantom killer; there is only me. I tell him she was running so fast that I didn't have time to stop. He watches me in silence.

The crowd hovers, a ring of strangers coiling and uncoiling like a cobra. Staring at the corpse, people ask questions I don't answer. Others are quiet. I want them all to disappear. The accident and the girl's death are a private disaster between her and me, made profane by prying eyes and whispered speech.

"Go that way," says the old man.

He points to more tents, more sheep, and more people in bold colors lit brighter by the implacable sun. As I walk, people abandon their tasks to join the silent congregation forming behind me. I pass two men brushing strips of shorn wool. Sitting cross-legged on a rug speckled with sand, girls who would be children in America but are women here sew tea leaves into pouches. As I pass, the sounds of life and work stop, and I feel as if the silence will make me deaf or blind or mute, destroy one of my senses to match the loss of some

other indescribable thing the moment the girl died. A few feet away, several tents are wide open. They are brimming with artifacts, jewels, carpets, and mirror-dotted clothes. These are things the nomads will sell as they trek from village to village on their way to Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad. But today, I am the wanderer and the nomads are the ones who are still.

A woman sitting on the sand points a bony finger, not looking up from her lap. Two women polishing copper plates notice as I make my way toward them. One of them begins to rise, then sees what is in my arms and falls back to her knees with a stifled cry. Leaning against a younger woman, Telaya's mother sobs, terror and sorrow melding together on her face. I am not a parent, though only a few months ago, I thought I would be. When I see her fear, I think I know. I want to embrace her. I hear myself utter worthless apologies, dwarfed by the enormity of her pain and of what I have done.

“Baseer!” Telaya's mother cries out.

I turn around. The girl's father is only a few feet behind me, staring. His hands start to shake. His eyes widen. “Telaya?” He takes her in his arms, and all I had planned to say is replaced by all I do not. I am a fraud, the quixotic wizard behind the curtain who can't make anything right. I hear Baseer's fractured breath, a whispered word to his dead child. On his face, I see that same fear. Telaya's mother is crying freely now.

Then the crowd ebbs, parting for three tall men with silver beards. Word has spread to the elders, who have left their work, their tea, their wives, and come here to deliberate my crime. I meet their gaze as they approach, hoping Rebecca is still inside the car and will drive off without me if she must.

I hear one of the elders say, “Go find Taj.”

There is some commotion as young boys spin this way and that, nodding and shouting, “Where’s Taj Maleki? Get Taj!”

A man with thick sideburns cuts through the now-silent crowd. He reaches me and stops. One finger gleams with gold, an onyx adorns the front of his turban, and his *piran tomban* tunic and trousers are finer than the other men’s, made of silk. A revolver sits in his holster, a Colt with a delicate pattern engraved on its grip. I stand before this strange man whose eyes are bereft of light, as if even the sun conceded defeat long ago.

“Who are you?” Taj asks in Farsi. I am relieved I speak the language, and that no one here could guess that I spoke more English than Farsi as a child.

“Daniel Abdullah Sajadi.”

The man takes a step forward, but his face betrays nothing. The Kochis will not recognize the name Sajadi like people in the city do. Maybe this man knows who I am, maybe not. He watches me silently.

“Did you not see her?” His voice is as flat as his gaze.

“She ran straight into the road.”

“And now she is dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Taj nods. “Who do you work for?” he says. From his dialect, I hear that he isn’t a Kochi. He’s from the city.

“The American government.”

A thousand eyes are on me. The only two people not looking at me are Telaya’s parents, who are standing behind Taj.

It seems indecent to watch a mother and father in their grief. I stare instead at the horizon. An outsider would not know that this arid land is a great fraud of nature. Just behind these deserts are acres of vibrant opium poppies with emerald-green leaves, thriving under the sun. The great Yassaman field, with its rich bounty of flowers, is not far. Nature has

surrounded these fields with the most fallow land on earth, giving the poppies better camouflage than it has given me. It is these flowers that I have dreamed of killing since I was a boy, not the children who help harvest them, the descendants of those who followed my father into war against the British empire.

These thoughts speed through my head, but her voice slices through all of them. *Look at me*, says the dead girl. The desert has flung me at the feet of its dwellers. I am that most vulnerable of creatures: a man out of context.

I can almost smell the poppies on the wind. They seem so trivial now, when just hours ago, they weighed more than anything else in my life. I fought for months at the office to convince my colleagues to begin the Reform with Fever Valley's largest field.

Taj looks at Telaya's corpse. Paper-white bone protrudes from her arm. Something glimmers in the sun: a shard of glass, lodged above her eyebrow, nearly invisible in the curve of her hair. I feel a throbbing pain above my own eye.

Baseer sobs, his words tumbling over each other in despair. "God, why have you done this to us? I have no other daughters." His wife squeezes his hand.

"He killed her," Baseer says to Taj, pointing at me as if sentencing me to join his daughter in death. Between cries, he whispers, "She was the only thing of value in my life."

The crowd is still silent, watching them. Taj places a hand on Baseer's shoulder and says, "What a terrible day for you."

His words are compassionate, but I wonder if the others can tell that the man is not. He is probably one of the callous merchants from the city who trick nomads into parting with their wares for less than they are worth, who travel with them for days at a time, choosing the best rugs and jewels and bartering them for a little food, money, perhaps

medicine. Kochis are sophisticated tradesmen, too sharp to fall for such tricks, and yet there are exceptions. Some earn enough to become members of the country's sliver of a middle class, but Taj Maleki must be one of the tricksters taking advantage of those who do not with his expensive clothes and his cheap sympathy.

He goes on. "Your loss is a great one. She can never be replaced." He assures the parents that they must not worry. There will be restitution. The word is an escalating sequence of four notes, the final syllable a battle cry. When he moves, his gun gleams in a familiar way I cannot place. The Colt is an ordinary weapon—my father taught me to fire one when I was six—but there is something else about it that is familiar. The memory is there, but I cannot connect past and present.

The girl's mother trembles, her face contorted as she spears me with her gaze. I take a step back, walking into the person behind me. I turn around and tell the young man I'm sorry. He stares at me, unmoving. All around me, I see menace painted on men's faces. Their knives and guns fill my vision; I fight back the stories I grew up with.

"Where were you traveling to?" Taj says.

"Herat."

"From Kabul?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"I'm so sorry." A voice inside me says I should not have come into the desert among these men. I know I don't want to die here. But there is another kind of knowing, one that rests deep in my bones like fossils in shale. My father used to tell me, *The rich world has rules and regulations. The poor world has rituals and traditions. These worlds weigh the same.*

Taj raises his hand and stops me before returning to the elders. They whisper things I am not meant to hear, shaking their heads as they speak, gesturing in turn to the road and the desert and the tents. “Yes,” one of the elders says loudly. “That’s fine.”

Taj shakes his hand and stalks toward me, grasping my arm without stopping. He jerks his chin toward the road. “We are going to the police.”

I am ashamed at my relief. I want to get away from here, even if this man is the only way out. As we pass the girl’s parents, Taj gestures toward the road and they fall in step with us. Baseer is still holding the corpse, but I feel the child’s weight as if she is back in my arms. I know that she will always be in my arms.

The trek back to the car feels shorter than the walk into the desert. Soon, we will be at the police station, where I will again have to confess. They will know who I am. It may save me. But Taj is watching me like the wind watches the leaves, knowing it may toss them as it likes, loosen them from trees at will.

Rebecca’s arms are wrapped around her, her hair whipping in the breeze, face pale and eyes swollen. Today is our anniversary, but it seems small now, too. I had hoped to see her as she used to be, to find even a trace of joy. Instead, I have added to her grief from three months ago.

She has moved the car to the edge of the road. She sees no one but me, her clouded eyes searching my face. I can scarcely glance at her, much less meet her gaze. I am crushed by the weight of Telaya’s death and further by the weight of my wife’s love because at this moment, I do not deserve it.

No words are exchanged, no introductions made. The girl’s parents wedge into the backseat with Taj, Telaya slumped across their laps. I see Taj gently pry the shard of

glass from her face and I feel that stabbing pain above my eye again. Taj asks if I know the station north of here. I do.

I dig my hands into the scalding leather of the steering wheel. It comforts me, one pain making another recede. The radio, now warped with indentations, is mercifully silent. On the floor are ordinary tools I usually keep in the trunk.

“I had to make it stop,” Rebecca whispers.

But I’m not staring at the tools. Under her seat is a mop of yellow wool. The tousled locks of the broken doll. The car is spangled with pastel rainbows cast by the mirrors on Telaya’s dress. It must have been the finest one she owned. The mirrors on the doll’s are making rainbows, too, smaller ones that dance across Rebecca’s ankles. I turn the key and the engine comes alive. High above us, a bird of prey soars into view, shuddering against the burning blue dome.

1

ON THAT SCALDING AUGUST DAY, SERGEANT NAJIB SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, POLISHING THE barrel of his gun. He liked being a sergeant, despite the fool of a constable they had given him and the discomfort of his starched uniform in the heat. Outside, there was nothing but a two-lane highway and the beige, boundless desert dotted with the occasional grungy bush or approaching mass of a nomad migration. Najib was proud to be king of this solitary mud box perched on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. From his station, he proudly served the young republic, proving that it was a serious entity. So serious that there were outposts of law and order even in places where the only real laws were those of nature, and the only real orders those of a warlord. Najib had loyally served the king, too, before the coup that had sent him packing four years ago.

Slipping the gun into his holster as noisily as he could, Najib stroked the cover of his well-thumbed Koran, then cast a glance at his young underling. Najib liked to think that the boy was a dedicated servant. It was an accepted fact that Kochi nomads were up to all sorts of trickery, and soon he would catch one of them in the act of something expressly forbidden, like passing off tin as silver or riding mules loaded with the remains of harvested poppies in the hope of starting their own field.

The grumble of a car interrupted his daydreams about glorious arrests and impending promotions. The constable shuffled out of his seat, turning to him for a cue. Najib might have walked to the station's only window, a cutout in the wall split by three vertical bars, but he would see no car from there. What imbecile had placed the single lookout point facing the desert instead of the road? He stalked out of the station, the younger man on his heels. A sand-colored Mercedes was slowing down by the station. It dipped onto the shoulder of the road, kicking up dust before coming to a stop. Najib's eyes fell on the hazy veil of blood on the grille, the red-streaked hood, the spider-webbed windshield. Inside the car was the strangest mix of folk. A stunning yellow-haired woman caught his eye first, then an urban type at the wheel and a cluster of Kochis in the back. It occurred to him that these might be the outlaws he had been waiting for.

He hooked his thumb into his holster and stood still. He would let them come to him. The driver stepped out. Above the man's right eye was a swollen, bloody gash. His shirt was stained, too. The blonde woman emerged, moving with a determination that reminded Najib of one of his wives. The last time this many people had turned up at once was when some hoodlums had organized a pack-beast race and a luckless camel had tried to outrun a big rig instead of the other animals, an unanticipated yet exciting twist that ended with the parched beast collapsing in a heap on the highway, making the asphalt look like it had grown a hump, and the terrified driver swerving off the road, his eighteen-wheeler belly-up like a giant bug. Luckily, there had been no deaths. Except a woman who had worn a *chaderi*, a blue burka, whose name no one knew and whose age no one could guess because they made sure she remained covered as she died.