

DAM BREAK

The Day Half of China Flooded

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PARTRIDGE

CHAPTER 1



In 2026, Azar Hosseini bloomed and became a beautiful woman—no longer a girl. Her interest in a man became her next journey growing up, but she was unaware of that just then.

She was aware that her looks were OK and didn't go about preening herself, but did occasionally look in the mirror just to check. She was determined to stay that way, with exercise and eating well. After all, she knew a woman's lot depended so much on her looks. She dressed demurely most of the time. Despite that, she did have thoughts of dressing outrageously at times.

Her life was about to be upended. Until now, she had been a happy-go-lucky girl pursuing interests, friends, and studies. Up till this day. Destiny was about to strike a blow.

She had been on the football field and scored a goal. It had been four years since she first saw the Iranian national team beat the Saudis, where the captain had done a double backflip, exposing a flawless, sculpted midriff. That had triggered her first experience in a yearning she could not yet describe, but a new awareness had entered her consciousness then.

Now she loved the freedom to run around at full speed like a cheetah. The soccer girls were allowed to wear soccer shorts, and she looked like the athlete she was. A speedster. An Asian cheetah,

and the thrill of catching her opponents and beating them to the ball would be the same as the cheetah going for a kill. It was sheer exuberance and the celebration of life. And she loved a workout.

She just had to do her double backflip, and her top rode up to display her midriff. This time, it was not some conceited act to get attention but pure exuberance. This goal counted, putting her team in front two minutes before full time.

Hposhang Hooshmnd was watching from a few metres away, while Azar was watching him too. He was a confident and handsome, athletic-looking, well-dressed young man. Azar found herself drawn to him in a way she couldn't fathom. Was it the confidence in his gaze or stance? She mused, her thoughts swirling with uncertainty. Or was it that he was a man and no longer a boy?

Hposhang's father had been strict but allowed his son to develop skills for his future. The best schools and memberships to sports, music, and dance clubs. His father's strictness involved instructions to ensure his son would not come home one day and tell him a girl was pregnant. His father knew the cost of that too well. It had happened to his oldest brother. A suitable education for later in life was his main focus with Hposhang.

Hposhang was now 22 years old. His wits, good looks, and athletic build made it easy for him to attract girls. While engaged in flirting with quite a passion, he had so far escaped any commitments. Sex before marriage was out for everybody, but thoughts of it were always prevalent. It was time to find a mate.

He experienced an unexpected yearning when he saw Azar. Savvy as he was with girls, this was a new experience for him. He didn't realise it was an attraction unlike any before, but it intrigued

him. Girls were normally chasing him, but this was different. He guessed he would have his work cut out with her. He knew what would work for him right now: smarts and fun to make her laugh. He waited for two minutes until full time, gave her 30 seconds, and wandered over and waited for her to approach.

‘That was so cool, and you didn’t fall. Can you show me how to do it again, please?’ asked Hposhang. Azar is puzzled but pleased.

‘Why do you want to see it again?’

‘If you can do it, I want to know if you can teach me how to do it. I can pay you or take you to the dance that is coming up,’ added Hposhang.

‘But can you dance, my hero?’ she asked in a flirting voice, and he broke into a breakdance.

‘Overkill,’ she hooted. ‘But you have to tell me what makes you happy without flirting. And by the way, that was not dancing with a lady,’ added Azar, but he responded that he had learned dancing three years ago and could teach her if she taught him the double flip. Azar liked him, liked that he wanted her to teach him something, and she loved dancing. She was at university, her third year, and maybe it was time to have a boyfriend. She enjoyed his quick wit and confidence. So much easier than digging a story out of a shy boy.

‘So, what captured your imagination as a kid?’ Azar enquired, her eyes gleaming with mischief. ‘Books, or perhaps magazines?’ she added, a playful grin tugging at the corners of her lips.

Hposhang was smart. Did he want to tell her that he looked at magazines of partially undressed women? No, but he did want to shock her, but in a way that worked for him. He was sure she had asked her question as a test. His response had to be funny, so he told

her he looked at magazines showing very old peasant women and magazines of falcons.

Azar chuckled. ‘Old peasant ladies, really? Did you dream of them before going to sleep?’

Hposhang grinned and said, ‘Of course. I wasn’t interested in the falcons much.’

Azar hooted even more and told him to stop it; it hurt too much laughing or trying not to laugh. And she was hooked. None of the boys had been her equal at teasing, and now she thought maybe that was because they weren’t men yet. They were mostly too introverted or shy, and it was exhilarating to battle her wits with someone her equal.

Azar’s forte had been teasing. She had used it as a weapon and as a shield. So many boys were too shy to tease back, and that helped her keep her distance from them while at the same time drawing out some good responses. It was like playing with fire—enjoy the heat but don’t get burned.

One night, Azar brought Hposhang Hooshmnd home to meet her father. She had been told about security and safety but not why, and she had her dog with her anyway—a constant companion. Tumultuous changes were about to unfold. She rang the bell. Her father, Esan Hosseini, saw her smiling face on the video monitor and let her in.

She hoped the meeting would go well, as she liked Hposhang. Her heartbeat quickened at the thought of a new future if her father approved. Esan was her only parent, and she adored him. Her mother had died when she was two years old, and though devastated, Esan had poured all his love into Azar.

Esan smiled a happy smile and told her he must get his phone to take a photo of the happy occasion. When her father had left the room, the two smiled with relief. 'That went well,' said Hposhang just before the father returned, laughed, and took a photo of the couple.

'We'll take more photos later if you two make it to next month,' teased Esan with an easy grin.

When Hposhang had been farewelled, Esan turned abruptly to Azar. 'What was his surname again?' Esan's sudden enquiry betrayed a hint of urgency. Azar's brows furrowed in confusion, her curiosity piqued by her father's demeanour.

She told him, and Esan's face turned ashen. 'I have dreaded telling you this, but the time has come. You can't marry in Iran, and I'll show you why. Come to my study right away, please.'

Azar looked perturbed. It must be about the past, and she had often seen him looking sad and lost in thought. Esan pulled a photo from his filing cabinet and placed it beside Hposhang's phone image. Azar's gaze flickered between the two pictures, a knot of apprehension forming in her stomach. 'That is so eerie,' remarked Azar. 'That man looks like he could be Hposhang's father. Is he?'

Esan replied, 'Yes, Azar, I know he is. Hposhang will be home in half an hour and tell his father that he has met the father of the girl he loves. His father is the man who tortured me when you were three years old, and in half an hour, he will have a secret service command knock on our door, and our lives will be over after they've tortured us for days or weeks. Go and pack. We leave in 15 minutes.'

'Oh, Father, you never mentioned that. You mean he tortured you, like with real pain?' she asked. 'And why have you kept this from me?'