
Chapter 16

Strange Phone Call!

Change of Plans

“**G**od please help me! I am running out of options and ideas. I felt like my ship was about to sink! I cried in my heart, and fervently searched the scriptures for something to hold on to. I found this passage that spoke well of my situation:

Psalm 107:23-28

*“Those who go down to the sea in ships,
who do business on great waters,
they see the works of the LORD,
and His wonders in the deep.
For He commands and raises the stormy wind,
which lifts up the waves of the sea.
They mount up to the heavens,
they go down again to the depths;
their soul melts because of trouble.
They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man,
and are at their wits’ end.
Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble,
and He brings them out of their distresses.”*

A few days earlier while I was at my aunt’s house, I received a phone call from one of my sisters saying that

someone from the Retirement Section of the Navy had called and wanted me to call him back.

At first, I contemplated, “Whom do I know at the retirement section who would want to talk to me?” Nader asked if I knew anyone there. The only people that came to my mind were my classmates from the Citadel who may have recognized my name and wanted to see me, but wouldn’t they have told me? Or perhaps, someone was playing a trick on me.

Frankly, I did not have time for anyone’s jokes or tricks under the circumstances that I was in. So, I called the number my sister gave me, but no one was there to answer my call. A couple of days later I called the number again, and the person that answered asked me to meet with them at the old Navy Base, section 1943, because someone there would like to meet with me. He made the appointment for 9am on the following Saturday but would not disclose who they were or what the nature of this meeting was. The more I thought about it, the more it bothered me. I could not imagine what they could want from me. The tone of the man’s voice on the phone was calm while at the same time serious and left me in suspense!

I had heard that other people who had also been trapped in Iran all had the same common denominator. They usually were taken into a room where they were interrogated and accused of being a spy. The interrogator would drill them and require their cooperation in return for letting them go and giving them the freedom to leave the country.

What I mean by cooperation is that they simply ask you to write a statement that you are indeed a spy from the country that you came from and sign it. Most people get

trapped by the word “promise” and agree to sign. Unfortunately, their problems have just begun. Usually that means prison, abuse and sometimes torture while waiting for their court time so their voice can be heard by a judge. But if you do not cooperate, the interrogation becomes more forceful and abusive. Either way you are at their mercy!

Two day later, as we were leaving the military courthouse, I asked Nader if he knew where the old Navy Base was. He pointed to the next street right above the military courthouse. So, since we were so close, we decided to stop by and check on it, to save ourselves a trip if possible.

As we approached the building, I noticed that it was surrounded by an eight foot iron-bar wall with several signs that said: “No Photography Permitted”. Seeing those signs made me realize we were in a secure area and I became very cautious.

When we approached the gate, there were a few guards who were there to help direct people to where they needed to go. One of the guards greeted us and asked how he could help. “We would like to meet with someone in section 1943”, Nader responded.

The guard immediately answered, “Security Section, Ha?”

Nader said, “No, the Retirement Section.”

The guard answered, “The Retirement Section is not here, it is on another street.”

Then he directed us to a room within the compound to get further help. The guard there recognized the code 1943

as the Security Section. At this point I became very suspicious and began to feel like I was about to be trapped. I was careful not to let on how I felt and decided to go a little further.

As we were directed to the next room, my heart started beating faster and I felt uneasy. I thanked God that Nader was doing most of the talking for me since I was very nervous!

Another gentleman greeted us and asked how he could help. Nader told the man that we were looking for Section 1943, the "Retirement Section".

The gentleman said "the Retirement Section is not here, but, since you are here, let me call Section 1943 to get some answers for you." He then picked up the phone and called, but no one was there to answer. Thank God!

I immediately jumped at the opportunity and told him that our appointment was not until next Saturday. We just happened to be close by and decided to stop and check on it, but we would come back at our appointed time. On that note we said good-bye and left quickly!

When we got out of the building we both realized that our Saturday appointment was unquestionably a trap and could have resulted in an unwelcomed interrogation or other unpleasant events. And my fear was that I might not see daylight again after that encounter.

I believe that the Iranian Navy did not have the jurisdiction to punish anyone, yet at the same time they felt that I should be punished. I believed that they secretly asked another department outside of the Navy to find a way

to punish me. That is why I was summoned to this unknown department for interrogation. Iran is well known for its human rights violations. People face torture or just disappear into a prison in Tehran **without ever going before a court of law. In that country, you are guilty until proven innocent. There are many well documented cases where individuals were taken to prison and ultimately given the death penalty without any trial.**

The horrifying tales of some Iranians who came to Iran from abroad for a visit were still floating around in the country. They faced many difficulties when they went to visit their families. Among them was the story of a man who taught Iranian dance and made some videos while in the USA. When he went home to visit his ailing Mom and Dad, the Government harassed him severely for making those videos. They fined, imprisoned, and abused him before he was able to get out of the country! They also treated some other actors, actresses and musicians with the same type of treatment. Many people in Iran talk about these humiliating issues and hate the way the government of Iran treats some people, while at the same time calling themselves, a ‘peaceful Islamic Republic’.

I had been very patient with the Navy and the people in the courthouse up to this point, but now it was time to take a different course of action. I was waiting to see how long it would take for Nader to lose his patience with them since he believed in his government and its leadership as the one who is appointed by Allah. He often said that the marriage of government and religion was the best thing since Allah’s way is always the right one. But when he finally saw the

deceit and lies by the people in the government on numerous occasions, he gave up.

Meanwhile I had been approached several times by a few people concerning the possibility of a rescue attempt to get out of Iran. It was scary and dangerous and if I was caught, the punishment would be severe!

Among those whom I spoke with was a man who had a brother who had made a similar trip to Iraq. We got together with him at his house to talk about our options. We talked about the pros and cons of leaving the country through Iraq. He first tried to discourage me because of the mountainous terrain. He began to tell us that when he went through there a few years ago, he was young, but he would never do it again. The terrain was rough and he became so exhausted that he ended up crawling on the ground. But when he realized that I was serious about this option, he volunteered to go with me. He also told me of another option. He knew a friend who could make me a fake passport so that I could leave from the airport, but we were not able to contact this person.

I also spoke to another person who had made several secret trips to Turkey through the mountains a few years ago, but he needed time to contact his connections to see if that was a possibility.

Then my cousin called me from Shiraz to introduce me to one of his friends, who also could take me out of Iran through Afghanistan or Oman which are located east and south of Iran. We actually met with him in Tehran at his brother's house. I liked his personality and he offered to take me all the way to a US embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. He

also said that he knew a few people that could help me in this escape and they were very capable and confident. After detailing a few routes and possibilities for our escape, we parted, but planned to get back together again at a later time.

I was praying to seek God's guidance in what I was about to do. Don't you just wish God would open His mouth sometimes and audibly tell you what to do and throw away any guess work? Well, it just doesn't happen that way!

The following day a neighbor friend also put me in touch with someone else to get me a fake passport to get me out of Tehran. He came by my dad's house and we talked, but he wanted a lot more money than I could afford at that time. Then at last, another breakthrough!

Thursday May 19th

While visiting one of my relatives a few days later, I met a man who was the operator of a convenience store. He spoke Turkish and had connections with some friends who actually lived on this side of the border as well as some relatives who lived on the other side of the border in Turkey. He told me that his friends were here the day before and had just left heading back home, but he could call them to return. I told him that would be great, so he picked up the phone and called his friend's cellular phone and asked him to come back to meet with me.

So, on Thursday, May 9th, I met Majid and Ghader at my parent's house. They said that they were brothers and convinced me of their strategy and plans. I asked for Majid's driver license. I took notes of his name, home and cellular phone numbers as a precautionary step and gave it to my mom just in case. Ghader claimed that he did not have his

with him. Then I asked them to give me until tomorrow to think about it, and they agreed.

I was very excited about our conversation and was almost certain they were the ones that I would be going with, but I needed time to pray and discuss the plan with my parents in private. We had also discussed the financial matters and the method of its dispersion. I agreed to pay them \$1,000 up front and when they delivered me to the US embassy in Turkey, they would be given \$1,500 more and when I arrived in the USA they would get the second \$1,500. It was agreeable to all.

I went to see my sisters that night to see how they felt about all of this. They felt that this was the right thing to do. My family knew I had done everything I could to do the right thing here in Iran, and I had been separated way too long from my family in America. Knowing this helped give me the peace I needed about my decision.

Ali volunteered to go with me on my journey. That encouraged and comforted me to have him come along. He wanted to make sure of my safety, and if possible, to do some sightseeing in Turkey as well.

I wanted to take them all with me but I could not! Nader had been by my side the whole time. He had given up his work for the last two months to be with me. In the beginning he believed in the Iranian system of government and often bragged about it. He expected that everything would go well and that the door would be open for me for future trips to Iran. He often told me that he wanted to be there for me to the very end and I liked his attitude very much. But, toward the end he lost his faith in the people in

the Iranian government and the Navy. He could not think clearly and would say things that I did not agree with. He was troubled with the idea that something might go wrong with my alternative plan and everyone in the family would blame him for that. That is why he was going against my wishes and several times attempted to discourage my decision to escape in this way. But my decision was firm, with no turning back. Even my Mom and Dad were in favor of my decision and gave me their blessings.

Surprisingly, I received a call on Friday, the day of my departure, from the person who was going to take me through the southern part of the county to Afghanistan or Oman. He was planning to make a run toward the south since he was in a business of cloth trade and wanted me to go with him. I asked him to give me a couple of days to make my decision and he agreed.

But ultimately, I chose the route through Turkey because it was closer to where we were, but if I did face some obstacles, then I would still have time to reroute my getaway through the southern part of the country to Afghanistan or via the Persian gulf to Oman.

That Friday, most shops were still open. I exchanged \$1000 of my American dollars for Iranian Toman at a jewelry store, said my goodbyes to my relatives that lived close by. Then I went to my parent's house and packed my bags.

About three weeks earlier, an Iranian friend of mine came to Iran from the USA to attend a funeral of one of his relatives. I went to see him at his mother's house in Tehran. I discussed my ordeal with him and asked him if he would mind taking one of my suitcases back with him when he went back home. He said that he did not mind at all. The suitcase contained mostly gifts and souvenirs that my family had purchased for me, my wife and children back home. This way I only had deal with my personal stuff such as my clothes and essentials. And with the journey I was about to embark on, it would have been impossible to carry anything more.