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## *Chapter 5*

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### **A New Passage!**

**I**t was one of the toughest decisions in my life to stay in a country where I was still struggling with the language, culture, and many other aspects of America life. Here is how a new chapter emerged before my eyes. During my sophomore year at the Citadel, while on a weekend pass from school, I met a young lady by the name of Ursa Jackson. We met on the elevator of the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston South Carolina, when we both were searching for the snack and drink machines!

My English was very poor, but we managed to talk for quite some time. She invited me to where all her friends were staying and we carried on our conversation for several hours. I believe this meeting was no accident, but ordained by God!

Ursa was from a small town in South Carolina called Bennettsville, which was about three hours away from Charleston. She played the piano at her local church and was encouraged to use her talent and entered a local county contest. She won first place in the contest and received an invitation to Charleston for the state competition.

It was there that I met my future wife, without realizing or expecting it at the time. We were not sure if we would ever see each other again after that early morning encounter. I was planning to go home to Iran soon for the upcoming holidays; but to be courteous to each other we exchanged our names and phone numbers. I told her that I would call her later when I came back from my trip.

The time soon came for me to leave for Iran. I would be there through Christmas and the New Year of 1975, as well as to participate in my sister's betrothal ceremony which took place around the same time.

Incidentally, while we are talking about marriage, let me say that marriage between a man and a woman under the Islamic law is nothing more than an agreement between the two persons. For the most part you don't even have to be in love in order to marry. It is a necessary step based on the natural desire of a man to be married to a woman or women (up to four). It is a very important social covenant and often it is arranged by the families involved.

But marriage between a man and a woman under the Christian doctrine is a picture of Christ and His Church. It is a love relationship. As Christ being the head of His Church and loves her sacrificially. The Church loves Christ as her Lord and follows Him with all her heart. That is why you are to marry only one. But since men or women sometimes lose their focus and get tempted, sin enters their mind and they act as the world does, which is not part of the Christian doctrine or teaching.

While I was there, my brother Parviz gave me his car to drive around as I wished. One morning while driving to the naval personnel office to give an account of my whereabouts, I had difficulty finding a parking space. I was on a one-way street with cars parked on the left and right sides of the road, leaving only enough space for one car to pass through. Suddenly, the driver of a Jeep belonging to the city of Tehran (being obvious by a logo on its side door), attempted to pass and squeeze by me. But due to the tightness of space, his tire guards hit the side of my car. The driver of the Jeep got out of his car, and instead of apologizing for hitting my car, he angrily raised his voice, wanting to blame me for not driving fast enough. This experience, among many others similar to that, got my attention while at the same time made me feel like being in a “cage”.

I was surrounded by people who seemed to always be angry! Perhaps the pressures of life and society had made them like that without them realizing it. These “negative” experiences made me reflect on how different it was in America.

When I first came to the United States, it was very exciting for me, but after a while, I became very apprehensive and uncomfortable because my mind could not digest the amount of freedom that was available here. However, after my trip to Iran in 1975, I realized how much there was to appreciate about this country. It is true that you will see excessive amounts of freedom in most western nations, and many find themselves having a hard time dealing with that, especially those who come from a closed society as mine.

In the USA, you may be faced with many good and bad challenges due to so much freedom but ultimately you decide how to respond to those challenges. As an example: Though I am free to drink alcoholic beverages, I choose not to do. I am free to gamble, but I do not like spend my money that way. I am free to express my thoughts but I refrain from hurting anyone by misuse of my language. I am free to exercise my religious freedom and worship however I want without being considered a second class citizen or being treated badly. I am free from many things but my freedom should not be a license to sin.

But in Iran under the Islamic Republic, you truly feel you are living your life in a “cage”! Government jobs will not be given to anyone except Muslims. Regular job interviews are more about your religious background than your education and talents. You are not allowed to talk negative about your government. If you are a woman, you are not free to uncover your hair in a public place. Television, radio and newspapers are censored. You are told what to do from the time you are born until the time you die! Your credit score depends on what your neighbors say about you. In other words there is not a system of credit check in Iran. Therefore they check your background by asking people who live around you. That is why gossiping and being nosey is very common and expected in Iran!

Today in Iran, dancing, singings, holding hands and other things similar to that have to be conducted within the four walls of your home. You have to get permission to have a wedding festival. No one is allowed to speak against Islam if you wish to live! Other than Islam there are only two other major and one minor religion that are allowed to be

practiced there. They are Christianity and Jewish and Zoroastrianism. But they are not free to speak publicly or evangelize about their faith. That freedom belongs to Muslims alone. Most may have rights, but not freedom.

Soon my visit ended and I returned to the USA. As I got off the plane, I felt like kissing the ground and thanking God for the freedom that I could not comprehend until my visit to Iran. Part of the freedom that I am talking about is the freedom of inner man. It feels like a peaceful wind that brushes and touches one's spirit and heart. You feel complete!

I returned to the Citadel and caught up with my schoolwork. Then one evening, I called my new acquaintance, Ursa to ask her if we could see each other again. She was busy with work, school, and church, so we were not able to see each other right away; but, we continued our friendship and kept in touch by writing to each other through the mail. Sometime later she invited me to her home where I met her parents, sister, and brothers along with many other relatives. They were all very kind and welcomed me as their guest. Ursa and her family attended a small church called Calvary Baptist where she was the pianist and her sister, Patricia, was the organist. I attended there with them when I went to visit her. She was also working at a department store called "Kress" while taking secretarial courses at a technical college in a nearby city.

She loved horses and had a couple of them on their farm. She attempted to teach me how to ride one since I was not accustomed to riding or being near them. One day when Ursa was at work, I decided to go for a ride by myself. Big mistake! The horses decided to turn around and go back

home and was out of my control! She took off so fast causing me to yell for help! I was fortunate that I did not get hurt, but needless to say I never tried that again!

Since I was committed to the Iranian Navy and was to go back home to Iran after graduation, we did not want to give each other any false hope that we might marry one day. As a result we chose to consider each other as friends. As our relationship grew we became closer and learned more of what we had in common. By visiting Ursa and her family on a regular basis, I was given the opportunity to learn more about typical life in an American family, their customs and traditions, and how people thought about things.

When the Easter holiday came, Ursa and her family invited me to spend the holidays in their home. By the passing of the time Ursa and I became closer and her parents decided that it would be okay if we fixed up one of their spare rooms on the second floor as my bedroom for when I came to visit. When I was on a weekend pass from the Citadel, I would drive to Bennettsville to be with them. And in time, I fell in love with their culture, and the purity of Ursa's heart.

A year later, during my junior year, I made a very courageous and daring decision. I decided to stay in America. A series of events surfaced and even helped in my decision.

One of our Iranian classmates who also was facing the same challenges as the rest of us decided to "jump ship" and left the Citadel that year without finishing his four year term. Then there was another freshman who left the Citadel. He was part of a new group of Iranian freshmen and was

having a hard time dealing with the school system as well as the Iranian Navy. As a result he decided to flee to Florida by taking a car belonging to one of his Iranian friends. By this time we were assigned a liaison officer by the Navy to deal with our “issues”. The liaison officer soon discovered where he was through the Florida State Police since the car was reported as missing. The officer went to the police department there to pick him up, but on the way back to Charleston, he lost him while they stopped for a bathroom break.

Having a liaison officer was good thing at first but as the time passed it did not please most Iranian cadets. Though he was our line of communication between us and Washington, his actions became more and more intrusive toward most of us. But since I was among the first students to come to the Citadel, he left us alone for the most part, but to the rest of the midshipmen he became a control freak!

No one was allowed to withdraw any of their own money from their bank accounts unless they had a permission slip from him! He was controlling and had to cosign every transaction they made, which involved their salaries. Furthermore none of our concerns were being reported to Washington to our satisfaction.

There was another friend and classmate of mine, Ali, who graduated one semester earlier than the rest of us. He also decided not to go back to Iran. I ran into him during my last semester and got a chance to see his new life he had begun here in the United States. He had a job as an insurance agent and had married a lady he was dating a couple of years earlier. He was one of my roommates during

our summer breaks, and a very good friend of mine, but never encouraged anyone to do what he did, including me. But needless to say, many of us were thinking the same, yet kept it secret to ourselves to the very end. It was a combination of many negative issues that caused many of us to turn our eyes to the USA. So I had made my decision to stay here for many reasons, but if I had any doubt all I had to think about was the young lady who had stolen my heart!

It was around my senior year when the news of Ayatollah Khomeini and rumors of uprising in Iran came to us through those new freshmen who came from Iran. This was the first time I was hearing the name of “Ayatollah Khomeini” which was not good news for any of us to hear. I did not think much about him since I felt that the Shah’s throne was secure.

It was during my junior year that I went to Ursa’s parents to ask for her hand in marriage. Later I wrote a letter to my parents to let them know about my engagement. In response, I was challenged with a long disappointing and rejecting letter. That letter was from my father considering me still as his little child; full of fatherly advice since in my culture, parents mostly arranged marriages and he informed me about several nice, beautiful ladies waiting for my return.

I followed that up with another letter, which contained an apology, informing them that I was joking about the engagement. It was obvious to me that this was not the right time to share this news with my parents, since they would not be able to understand my circumstances or conditions here. I had not discussed these matters completely with them either. I felt bad that I could not talk freely with them by phone or by letter. In addition, I was hoping that by some



possibility, conditions would change and I could take Ursa back to my home country after graduation. (Incidentally... we were not allowed to marry any foreign person while working for the Iranian government.)

A few weeks before graduation, in the summer of 1977 an unspeakable feeling came over me. I knew that the time was near for me to make the biggest decision in my life, which was to stay here in the USA and forsake my country of Iran, my parents and the rest of my family. My heart was torn between my love for my family and my love for Ursa. I prayed every chance I had about my choices.

I remember lying down on my bed in my room at the Citadel, crying to God like a baby, asking Him to show me the way... wishing to be a robot, controlled by Him alone. However, after a while I realized that I still had to make a decision as to what to do. Time was coming to a “point of no return.”

On one hand, I did not want to dishonor my parents; while on the other hand, I did not want to destroy Ursa’s future and break her heart, since I had given her the promise of my love. Honor and loyalty meant a lot to me. The code of conduct instilled by the Iranian Navy did hurt me, and as a result, I lost all my interest in them. My parents, though, still kept their honor and loyalty toward me, which was why I was praying so hard and so desperately needing God’s influence and guidance.

I was going through my last summer school and was getting ready for the final exams when I suddenly realized that within weeks I had to make my final decision. In the middle of the week, I rushed to the town of Bennettsville

where Ursa lived. It was a three hour ride away from my school. She was glad but surprised when she saw me.

“What is wrong?” She asked. “I need to talk to you,” I responded.

Then we drove off toward a farm road, a peaceful area where we could talk and I could share my heart freely. I wanted to know how she felt or would respond to my request to possibly go back home for a short while before marrying her. Then after seeing my parents I would return to the States and marry her.

She said that she understood how I felt about my parents, and that what I was doing by staying here and forsaking my parents she could not do to her family. At the same time, she would not tell me what to do, for the decision was mine to make. She also responded by telling me that she had already mailed the wedding invitations; but if she had to, she would cancel the wedding. She said that she felt in her heart that once I left the country, I would not return anytime soon if at all.

I knew what she was saying was true. To be frank, I could not guarantee my return to the States either, but I needed to hear it from her. So, after hours of heartfelt conversation, I went back to school realizing that I could never be happy working for the Iranian Navy. In addition, if I stayed in the Navy, I would be miles away from where my parents lived and except for a short break, I would not see them regularly either. Nevertheless, I still needed the blessing of my parents in my marriage. It would mean so much to me if my parents would approve of my decision to stay here in the USA so that I could follow my dreams.

After seeking God's will through prayer, talking with Him and expressing my need for the blessings and understanding of my parents, I wrote a long, detailed letter to them. In that letter, I explained the reasons why I chose to stay in the USA, and had a friend of mine who was going back home after graduation to mail it for me in Tehran to prevent anyone (other than my parents) in Iran from reading it.

Shortly after graduation in May, 1977, I flew to Washington D.C. in order to pick up my passport and return ticket to Iran. Even though I had no intentions to go back home, I wanted to have all my documentation with me when I applied for my permanent residency here in the USA.

I hailed a taxi at the airport in Washington D.C. and asked the driver to take me to the Iranian embassy. I asked the taxi driver to wait for me since I was not planning to be there long. I was sitting in the office, talking to one of the personnel hoping to get my passport and ticket right away when the taxi driver came up to where I was. He wanted to know how much longer he had to wait for me. That prompted me to ask the same question from the office personnel as to how much longer it would be. He then told me that the person in charge with the key to the safe was not there yet. The safe was where they kept all the passports and tickets and it would be better for me to pay off the taxi driver.

Finally, after waiting for one hour, I was given my passport and airline ticket. I left the embassy to catch another cab to the airport. I was a bit nervous while walking around the airport, and kept watching behind me to see if anyone was following me, but I noticed nothing out of the

ordinary. I flew back to Charleston, SC and said hello to my new life here in the USA.

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*This was the beginning of a new life for me here in the U.S. and I was very happy in so many ways. But unfortunately about the same time in my home country, it was the beginning of turmoil. This of course, made me sad especially for my family who would have to endure what lay ahead.*

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