

Persian Marchers: A Novel

Mo H Saeidi

BOOK TWO

The Flood

Chapter Twenty-Five (continued)

Cyrus held up the mysterious envelope. "Listen to me. All I know is that the Revolutionary Guards instructed me to present this at Evin Prison by seven o'clock this morning."

One by one, relatives and friends examined the envelope. Their faces expressed sympathy for Cyrus, while a few showed both fear and relief that they were not the ones in this dilemma. Meanwhile, Parviz was trying hard to suppress a touch of *schadenfreude* in the back of his mind.

Jamshid dismissed all concerns with a wave of his hand. "Listen, Cyrus, you can't make it to prison by seven. Why don't you wait until tomorrow?"

Cyrus could not believe this casual attitude, this circus-like atmosphere. "No way," he objected. "Anyhow, tomorrow is Friday, the Persian weekend, and I want to get to the bottom of this problem as soon as possible."

Habib insisted there had to be a reason. "How about back in Texas, Cyrus?" he asked, "Are you involved with any group that agitates against the Islamic Republic of Iran?"

Cyrus shook his head.

"How about during this trip," Jamshid suggested. "Did you meet someone from the opposition, perhaps one of your old comrades?"

"No. They are all dead," Cyrus said. He glanced at Tooraj whose confident face displayed not even a hint of worry.

"They probably want money," Tooraj said. "They always invent new fees, especially for visiting Iranian-Americans."

Others immediately debunked that notion. Any fees would have been collected before they issued the exit permit. But Maryam liked this theory. She hugged Cyrus and told him matters could not possibly be that serious, otherwise he would have been arrested by the Revolutionary Guards and transferred directly to Evin Prison.

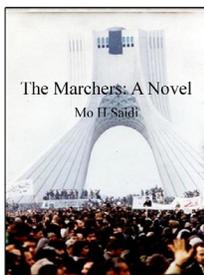
She sat next to him on the wide sofa and patted his hand consolingly. "I know this has ruined your schedule, but I pray the matter will be resolved quickly."

Tooraj inspected the envelope with intense curiosity, turned it over several times, and finally announced, "I am sure this is not a life-threatening problem. It must be some sort of stupid plot by the Revolutionary Guards." He said this with such conviction that Cyrus felt a first glimmer of hope.

Confused by the sequence of events, Parviz agreed with Tooraj. "It cannot be anything serious. Moreover, the Revolutionary Guard at the airport helped you with the phone. Surely that means they do not consider you a dangerous person. I cannot believe our government would harm innocent people."

Cyrus, impatient and irritated by the many contradictory evaluations, insisted, "I prefer to go to Evin Prison this morning and get the problem cleared up without delay."

Tooraj told everybody about an innocent passenger who was pulled out of a departing airplane and held in Evin Prison for a few weeks. Eventually he was cleared of any wrongdoing and was released. It simply cost him some money to speed up the process. Jamshid countered with a story of Iranian visitors who spent months in Evin Prison before the Revolutionary Court allowed them to leave. Cyrus's fears of serious complications reignited. After more talk, it was agreed that Cyrus had no choice but to obey the order and go to Evin Prison.



Only Jamshid remained stubbornly opposed. "You must avoid them like the plague, Cyrus! Go ahead and leave the country. It can be done!" he insisted. "My nephew fled the country across the Turkish border by creeping among grazing sheep." But nobody took his suggestion seriously.

Cyrus had promised Emily to call from the transit lounge in Frankfurt. By now she would be expecting his call. But what could he tell her? Considering the conundrum he was in, he decided to wait until he knew more about his situation.

"Maryam, please call Emily in case they keep me in prison. Do not make any excuses, just tell her the truth. She is a strong woman and will understand," Cyrus insisted. "Besides, she is too intelligent to be convinced by a silly cover story."

Habib patted Cyrus's back reassuringly. "Doctor, don't get too stressed out. I bet you a game of backgammon that you will call her yourself this afternoon."

Cyrus handed his American passport to Maryam and embraced her. "Keep this in a safe place." Then he followed Jamshid out the door. Maryam's eyes welled but she didn't say a word.

The caravan left with Jamshid leading the way, with Cyrus, Tooraj and Parviz in his car. Two cars with assorted relatives and friends followed.

"They may not take you to solitary confinement right away. The process can be very slow. They will keep you waiting for days before interrogating you," Jamshid predicted. He had seen a close friend of his disappear into prison a year ago and had yet to hear from him. "Just keep your cool. They will try to wear you down with all kinds of intimidation and promises."

Tooraj insisted, "Why be so dramatic? Maybe this is a simple case of mistaken identity."

"I know I have done nothing to deserve this. Somebody must be making a bureaucratic blunder," Cyrus declared. "But I am ready for anything."

Jamshid quickly cautioned, "Just be careful, Doc. You are in the land of lawless revolutionaries where everyone is a chief with his own base of power. Do not dare challenge anyone! They can pull the trigger on you without remorse or fear of punishment. Nobody can stop them!"

The cars drew into the parking lot near the main gate of Evin Prison. The dusty gravel lot was already packed with vehicles of all sizes and ages. A large sign at the gate read:

"Illegal entry into the prison area strictly prohibited! No visitors or relatives allowed inside! Approach the gate one person at a time!"

It was almost seven in the morning when Cyrus bade farewell to everyone and walked determinedly along the tall wall toward the prison gate. When he looked back he saw his entourage had formed a line and followed him at a safe distance on the opposite sidewalk. They were nervously observing his every step. Inhaling the dusty air apprehensively, Cyrus approached the gate and stood in front of the armed guard.

"I am here to report to Revolutionary Court No. 2."

The guard nodded and held out a hand. "Your identification!"

Cyrus showed him his Persian driver's license.

The guard looked at the photo and smirked. "Do you have anything else?"

Cyrus handed the envelope to the guard. "I am supposed to present this letter to the revolutionary court here in Evin Prison."

The guard perused the serial number and pointed down the road: "Go to the reception desk of the administration office in that large red brick building, there on the left side of the main road. They will tell you what to do."

Before disappearing behind the prison walls, Cyrus turned back once more and saw the frightened faces of his supporters in the distance. Would he ever see them again? Would he end up among nameless corpses? Would he spend months languishing in a dark cell before being released without explanation or apology? All those scenarios mentioned earlier raced through his mind. He