

One Night in Tehran

LUANA EHRLICH

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Visit the author's website at www.luanaehrich.com

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To Ray Allan Pollock,
for giving an eleven-year-old girl
permission to read adult spy novels.

PROLOGUE

In far northwest Iran, a few minutes after clearing the city limits of Tabriz, Rahim maneuvered his vehicle onto a rutted side road. When he popped open the trunk of the car to let me out, I saw the car was hidden from the main highway by a small grove of trees. In spite of our seclusion, Rahim said he was still anxious about being seen by a military convoy from the nearby Tabriz missile base.

For the first time in several hours, I uncurled from my fetal position and climbed out of the vehicle, grateful to breathe some fresh air and feel the sunshine on my face. As my feet landed on the rocky terrain, Rahim handed me a black wooden cane. I wanted to wave it off, but, regrettably, I still needed some help getting around on my bum leg.

Rahim slammed the trunk lid down hard.

“You can stretch for a few minutes,” he said, “but then we must get back on the road immediately. Our timing must be perfect at the border.”

Rahim and I were headed for the Iranian/Turkish border, specifically the border crossing at Bazargan, Iran. He was absolutely confident he could get me out of Iran without any problems. However, during the last twenty years, I’d had a couple of incidents at other border crossings—Pakistan and Syria to be precise—so I

wasn't as optimistic.

While Rahim was tinkering with the car's engine, I exercised my legs and worked out the stiffness in my arms. As usual, I was running through several "what ifs" in my mind. What if the border guards searched the trunk? What if the car broke down? What if we were driving right into a trap?

I might have felt better about any of these scenarios had either of us been armed. However, Rahim had refused to bring along a weapon. Carrying a gun in Iran without a special permit meant certain imprisonment. Imprisonment in Iran meant certain torture, so I *certainly* understood his reasons for leaving the weaponry back in Tehran.

Still, a gun might have helped my nerves.

I was surprised to hear Rahim say I could ride in the front passenger seat for the next hour. He explained the road ahead was usually deserted, except for a farm truck or two, so it seemed the perfect time to give me a brief respite from my cramped quarters.

I didn't argue with him.

However, I thought Rahim was being overly cautious having me ride in the trunk in the first place—at least until we got nearer the Turkish border. I'd been passing myself off as an Iranian of mixed ancestry back in Tehran, and now, having grown out my beard, I didn't believe a passing motorist would give me a second look.

When I climbed in the front seat, the cloying smell of ripe apples emanating from the back seat of Rahim's vehicle was especially pungent. Flat boxes of golden apples were piled almost as high as the back window, and the sweet-smelling fruit permeated the stuffy interior of the car. On the floorboard, there were several packages wrapped in colorful wedding paper. I was sure they reeked of ripe apples.

We had been back on the road for about twenty minutes when Rahim said, "Hand me one of those apples and take one for yourself, Hammid."

Although Rahim knew my true identity, he continued to address

me by the name on my Swiss passport, Hammid Salimi, the passport I'd used to enter Iran two years ago. Unfortunately, it was now a name quite familiar to VEVAK, the Iranian secret police, who had already prepared a cell for me at Evin Prison in northwest Tehran.

After we had both devoured the apples, Rahim rolled down his window and threw the cores down a steep embankment.

"When you get back inside the trunk," he said, "you'll have to share your space with some of those." He gestured toward the apple boxes in the backseat.

I glanced over at him to see if he was joking, but, as usual, his brown, weather-beaten face remained impassive. Although I'd spent the last three months living with Rahim's nephew, Javad, and learning to discern Javad's emotional temperature simply by the set of his mouth or the squint of his eyes, I'd barely spent any time with Rahim. During the last two days together, he'd never made any attempt at humor, and it didn't appear he was about to start now.

I protested. "There's barely enough room for me back there."

"It will be snug with the boxes, but you will fit," he said. "If the guards open the trunk, I want them to see apples."

I felt a sudden flash of anger. "Before we left Tehran, you told me they wouldn't open the trunk at the border. You said they wouldn't even search the car."

My voice sounded harsh and loud in the small confines of the car.

However, Rahim calmly replied, "They will not search the car, Hammid. They have never searched inside. They have never searched the trunk. It is only a precaution."

He turned and looked directly at me, his penetrating black eyes willing me to trust him. It was a look I instantly recognized. I had used that same look on any number of assets, urging them to ferret out some significant nugget of intel and pass it on to me, even though I knew the odds of their being caught were high.

He returned his eyes to the road. "Surely you're acquainted with making minor changes as a plan evolves."

I took a deep breath. "You're right, of course." I suddenly felt

foolish at my amateur reaction. “Planning for the unexpected is always smart. The more precautions you want to take, the better it will be for both of us. I’m sorry for questioning you.”

For the first time, I saw a brief smile on his face. “There’s no need to apologize,” he said quietly. “The last three months have been difficult for you. Your paranoia is understandable.”

Rahim shifted into a lower gear as we approached a steep incline. When we finally rounded a curve on the mountainous road, our attention was immediately drawn to two military vehicles parked on the opposite side of the road about one-half mile ahead of us. Several men were standing beside two trucks. They were smoking cigarettes and looking bored.

“It’s not a roadblock,” I said.

“No, we’re fine.”

Suddenly a man in uniform, leaning against the front bumper of the lead truck, noticed our approach and quickly took a couple of steps onto the highway. He signaled for us to pull over.

“Say nothing unless they speak to you first,” Rahim said. “My papers are inside the glove box. Do not open it unless I say, ‘Show them our papers.’”

“I have no papers, Rahim.”

He eased the car onto the side of the road. “I put them inside the glove box,” he said, “but don’t open it unless I tell you to do so.”

As the military officer crossed over the highway toward our car, I watched the reaction of the men standing outside the two vehicles. Although the insignia on the officer’s uniform indicated he was a captain in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the men traveling with him were not in uniform. However, that didn’t mean they weren’t soldiers.

In fact, as I studied them, I knew they had to be affiliated with some aspect of Iran’s vast military organization. They wore nearly identical Western clothing, had short military haircuts, and all their beards were regulation trim.

No longer bored, the men appeared alert now as their captain

approached our car.

To my surprise, Rahim was opening the door and getting out of the car before the captain spoke one word to him. His behavior went against one of my favorite tenets of tradecraft: never draw attention to yourself.

The soft-spoken man I had been traveling with for two days suddenly disappeared. Instead, a loud, fast-talking stranger took his place.

“Captain,” Rahim asked, “how may I assist you today? Did you have a breakdown? What a lonely stretch of road on which to be stranded.”

Within seconds of greeting the captain, Rahim threw his arm around his shoulders and walked him away from our car and back across the road. There, Rahim engaged in conversation with some of the men, and, at one point, they all broke into laughter at something he said.

After a minute or two, I saw the captain draw Rahim away from the group and speak to him privately. Although I could hear none of their conversation, I tensed up when the captain gestured across the highway toward me. As Rahim continued an animated conversation with him, they began walking back across the road together.

Arriving at the car, Rahim opened the back door and pulled out two boxes of the apples we were transporting.

“Here you are, Captain. Take two of these. I’ll bring two more for your men. You will not find finer apples in all of Iran.”

As the captain leaned down to take the apples from Rahim, he glanced inside the interior of the car, quickly taking note of the apples, the wedding presents, and the black cane I’d placed between my legs. Lastly, his scrutiny fell on my face.

I smiled and deferentially lowered my head toward him, greeting him in Farsi. He didn’t respond, but Rahim was speaking to him at the same time, so I wasn’t sure he’d heard me.

The captain was already walking back to the transport trucks when Rahim stuck his head back inside the car and removed two other

boxes.

Our eyes met.

He nodded at me. I nodded back.

Everything was fine.

While Rahim was distributing the apples among the men, I took the opportunity to look inside the glove box. I found three items: Rahim's passport, his travel documentation, and a small handgun.

Presumably, the handgun was my documentation had the captain demanded it.

There was something about having a fighting chance that did wonders for my morale, and I found myself smiling.

I shut the glove box before Rahim returned.

I decided not to say anything to him about my discovery.

Without a word, Rahim got back inside the car and started the engine. As we drove past the captain and his men, several of them raised their apples to us in a goodbye salute.

"That was quite a performance, Rahim."

He continued to glance at his rear-view mirror until the group disappeared from sight.

Finally, he said, "The captain only wanted information on road conditions. He said he'd heard there were some rockslides in the area. One of the drivers was complaining about his brakes, and he was worried about the safety of his men as they made the descent."

"Who were those men? What unit did they belong to?"

"The captain didn't say, but their cigarettes came from Azerbaijan. That should tell you something."

Azerbaijan bordered Iran and was about six hours north of our location. Although it had once been a part of the Soviet Union, it was now an independent republic with close ties to Iran. Like most Iranians, the majority of the people were Shia Muslims. Tehran wanted to keep it that way. I'd heard rumors there was a unit of Iran's military specifically assigned to make sure the Sunni minority in Azerbaijan remained the minority. The unit in charge of such an operation was the *al Quds* force.

“Members of *al Quds*, then?”

“That’s my guess. We’ve been hearing reports the Sunnis are growing in popularity. Tehran won’t sit still while that happens. But that’s good. Mossad likes it when Tehran is distracted.”

“Why wasn’t the captain interested in me?”

“I told him you were my father, plus you look harmless, Hammid.”

It was true. I’d lost weight during my three-month ordeal, and, since I’d spent the time indoors, my skin had taken on an unhealthy pallor. However, I doubted I looked old enough to be his father.

“I also told him you’d fallen in the orchard and injured your leg. He wasn’t surprised at your reluctance to get out of the car, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

I remembered the way the captain had inspected the contents of our car and his lingering look at my cane. He may have believed Rahim, but he had checked out his story anyway.

“You said you were on your way to your cousin’s wedding in Dogubayazit?”

“Yes, and if I hadn’t given him the apples, he might have inquired further about the gifts.” He flicked his hand toward the wedding presents on the backseat floorboard. “Then, I would have insisted he take one or two of those gifts for his sister.”

As in most Middle Eastern countries, bribes and “gifts” were a way of life among the people, especially with military and government officials. Nothing got done without them. If you made inquiries or requested help from any bureaucrat, they expected something in return.

“You were very generous with the apples back there. Will you have enough for your friends at the border now?”

I tried not to sound worried, but whenever I found myself involved in someone else’s operation, I got nervous.

He was dismissive. “Yes, there will be plenty. Now help me find the turnoff road. It leads over to a lake, but the sign is hard to see. We’ll make the switch there.”

He slowed down, and we both concentrated on the passing landscape. The trees were dense, and the late afternoon shadows made finding the lake road difficult.

“I think it’s coming up,” Rahim said.

I pointed off to my right. “There it is.”

He made a sharp right turn onto a dirt road leading through a canopy of trees. One-half mile down the road, a secondary road branched off, and Rahim was able to make a U-turn at the fork in the road. Then, he pointed the car back toward the main highway.

Rahim killed the engine, and, after glancing down at his watch, he looked over at me. At that point, I knew I was about to be given The Speech, a last-minute review an operations officer usually gave to a subordinate before a critical phase commenced.

Technically, I wasn’t a subordinate of Rahim’s organization.

Still, I listened carefully.

“Remember the traffic at the border will move very slowly, and, once I’m pulled over, I expect there will be a long wait. At times, you will hear loud voices. That’s not a cause for worry. If you hear angry voices, especially my angry voice, you should start to worry.”

He paused for a long moment. Then, he opened the glove box and removed the handgun I’d seen earlier.

He handed it over to me with an understanding smile. “I’m assuming you found this already.”

I checked the chamber.

It was loaded.

“Thanks, Rahim.”

“Any questions?”

“No. I’m confident you’ve thought of everything.”

We both got out of the car, and I helped him remove some of the apple boxes so he could stack them in the trunk after I was inside.

Before climbing in, I said, “Rahim, please hear me when I say I’m grateful for everything you and Javad have done for me. Perhaps, someday, I can repay you.”

Rahim placed his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

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“That will never be necessary, Hammid,” he said. “It has been God’s will for us to help you.”

As I tucked myself into the trunk again, I found myself hoping it was also God’s will for me to make it out of Iran alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luana Ehrlich is a freelance writer, minister's wife, and former missionary with a passion for spy thrillers and mystery novels. She began her series of Titus Ray novels when her husband retired from the pastorate. Now, she writes from an undisclosed location, trying to avoid the torture of mundane housework and golf stories. However, she occasionally comes out of hiding to play with her two grandsons or to enjoy a Starbucks caramel macchiato. She resides in Norman, Oklahoma.

Visit the author's website, **luanaehrlich.com**, to learn more about *Two Days in Caracas*, the next book in the Titus Ray thriller series.

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Luana loves to hear from her readers. She can be reached at author@luanaehrlich.com.

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