The Dawn of Saudi

In Search for Freedom

A contemporary romantic mystery by

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For my cousin Sahar: appreciate your freedom and never take it for granted. Stand up for human rights and speak up for those whose voices are stifled by unconscionable leaders. Here is to you and here is to liberty and equality for all humanity.

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PREFACE

Why did I write about Saudi Arabia instead of Iran was the question many people asked. I chose Saudi Arabia because in order to understand what constitutes today's Iranian government, you must first understand Islam and in order to truly comprehend Islam, you must go to the source of where it all it started – the *Wahhabis* known today as the Saudis who believe that they are the unifiers of Islamic practice.

In 550 B.C, Cyrus the Great established the first Persian Empire known today as Iran. He ordered the release of Babylonian slaves, accepted all cultures and tolerated all religions. He put his Babylonian address in writing carved on a clay cylinder which was later found in 1887. Recognized as history's first charter of human rights, this clay cylinder can be found today in the united nation's building in New York City.

Zoroastrianism, recorded in history around 6th century B.C. and based on the teachings of Prophet Zoroaster, became the main religion of the Iranian people. Their code of conduct was good thoughts, good words and good deeds. When the Arabs conquered Iran around 640, they introduced *Jizya*, a special tax declared on the non-Muslims – nonbelievers. It was first used on the Zoroastrianism in Iran. Many Zoroastrians fled the country. Others who stayed could not afford to pay and eventually were forced to convert to Islam. Anyone who later changed their mind and wanted to convert back to their prior religion or to another religion was judged as apostate and condemned to death.

The conquest of Iran by the Islamists forever shaped the struggle between the modernists and the fundamentalists. I left Iran long before the Islamic revolution of 1979 and grew up in the U.S. However, my memories of Iran are vivid such as going to the beach with my family and running around in our bathing suits, my

mom dressing up in sexy dresses when she went out to dinner with my father and his friends. There were concerts and dances with lively music and picnics in lush green forests with men and women mingling.

I also recall the religious fundamentalists of Iran such as my uncle's wife who always wore a black chador with only one eye showing. She wasn't able to have children and had insisted on adopting me. "You already have two other children, why don't you give this one to me," she had told my mother. The reason my uncle's wife had wanted me was that I was family and thus I would not have to cover up in front of my uncle and since I was a girl, my uncle's wife would be allowed to remove her chador in front of me. Fortunately, my mother refused her offer.

I remember my two cousins who were pushed into marriages they abhorred. One of my aunts, a fundamentalist, and her son, a bully, forced my cousin to marry a man she did not love. My mother said I was 40 days old when she attended her wedding. She told me tears poured down my cousin's face as the musicians played and people danced. After her marriage, my cousin got pregnant. Depression caused her to get sick and she ended up in a hospital for six months. Years later, my other cousin who was a year younger than me, wanted to marry a man she loved but her brother made her marry another because he was rich. Both these marriages ended up in divorce.

As I recalled these marriages, I wondered what would have happened to my cousins had they refused to marry men they did not love? And so I created female characters and placed them in the most impossible situation – Saudi Arabia. Because even in today's Islamic Republic of Iran where many rights have been taken away from women, women are allowed to vote and have positions in the parliament. They are more educated, have better jobs and more freedom than the Saudi women.

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ONE

They buried her in an unmarked grave. Only in death did Saudi women and men receive equal treatment. Her father's face was grim, his body cold as ice. Her grandfather thought she was a disgrace to the family name. Her mother didn't shed a tear – not because public displays of grief were frowned upon since Saudis consider all stages of life and death as submission to God's supreme will – but because she knew her 22-year-old daughter, Sahar, was finally free. She was going to miss her daughter's generous nature of giving away her belongings to those who needed them: her beautiful chocolate eyes that sparkled when she laughed; her spunky aura that brightened any room she entered. *Oridol horeyata* – Sahar often said – I want my freedom. Perhaps it was all for the best, Asima thought, almost fainting from the sweltering August heat underneath her black cloak. She squeezed the hand of her youngest daughter, who had insisted on accompanying her, as she turned around and began walking back toward the family's Rolls-Royce.

"Will I ever see my sister again?" Asima's 8-year-old daughter asked as she got in the back seat of their car with her mother and her uncle Nadim. Her father, Saad, sat in front with the chauffeur.

"Someday in heaven," her mother said, looking one last time in the direction of Sahar's grave and hoping that she would be liberated at last.

A limousine behind them followed, carrying Asima's unhappily married eldest daughter and her brute of a husband. *How lucky for Sahar that she was dead,* the eldest sister thought. *If she had the courage, she would follow suit and escape this life of bondage.*

There had been much speculation about exactly how Sahar's life in Riyadh ended. Those who attended the wedding believed she was so stressed from being forced into marriage that she suffered a heart attack and died on her wedding night. Her immediate family thought the beautiful young bride was depressed

and committed suicide. But the headlines printed in bold letters and announced over television and radio prior to the six o'clock news to entice people reported: *The bride of Saudi business tycoon, Husam bin Zaffar, died on their wedding night.*

One TV reporter said:

Sahar bint Saad bin Kadar Al-Hijazi (Sahar, daughter of Saad and granddaughter of Kadar Al-Hijazi.), the third wife of Husam bin Zaffar bin Amjad Abdul Samad (Husam, son of Zaffar, grandson of Amjad Abdol Samad) collapsed on their wedding night, went into a coma and died within an hour. Her physician reported that she died of an aneurysm.

International newspapers added:

Friends and family declined to comment, but an anonymous source reportedly stated, "The stress of being forced into a marriage she abhorred was more than likely what caused the vessel to burst. Sahar was a happy loving girl who none of us will ever forget."

Cynthia Crawford's eyes bulged when she read the news. She had sumptuous thick lips, an hourglass figure and lush black and silver hair that reached her shoulders. "Drew, have you seen this morning's paper?" she asked as she burst into the sunlit breakfast room dressed in her charmeuse robe and pajamas, looking for her husband. Theirs was a marriage on paper. They lived separate lives, but when it came to business and money matters, they collaborated.

Andrew Jason Crawford II of the Crawford Enterprises, a debonair man, the same age as his wife, 63, looked up in surprise. He rarely ran into her as early as seven in the morning in their Pasadena mansion, about a 15-minute ride north of downtown Los Angeles. "I was about to read it when you interrupted," he answered creasing his high forehead hidden underneath his full head of softly layered gray hair. He opened the Sunday paper and spotted the article about Sahar's death. "Good lord! That poor girl.

I must call and extend my condolences to her husband." Husam was soon to be one of Crawford's major investors due to his association with Sahar's family.

"Such a shame," remarked Cynthia. "They don't show her picture here but I read somewhere that she was lovely."

"Was she? Aneurysm. Who would have thought? I suppose this will postpone his visit to the U.S."

"What's going to happen to the merger, now?" Cynthia was nobody's fool. She may not have bothered with the day-to-day office business, but because she owned 50 percent of her husband's assets, she made sure to keep up with current events that could affect their finances.

The Crawford Enterprises, a Real Estate Acquisition, Inc., was a publicly traded multibillion-dollar business with American and international investors. Andrew Crawford and his 37-year-old eldest son, Jason, sat on the board of directors.

Kadar, Sahar's grandfather, was a famous Saudi multibillionaire. A well-known businessman, he owned 65 percent of his company and the rest was owned equally by seven foreign investors who were not involved in the day-to-day activities of the partnership. Kadar's businesses hadn't been doing well lately. He was a major shareholder in Crawford enterprise.

Sahar's widower, Husam, was also a well-recognized multibillionaire businessman. He owned diverse businesses such as manufacturing, retail, real estate and technology all over the world and his prospering company was privately owned. Husam's company was supposed to merge with Kadar's. If their companies didn't merge, then Kadar would have to file bankruptcy and sell his businesses and shares in Crawford Enterprise to cover his debts. This would, in turn, not only devastate Kadar's business partners but would also make the Crawford shares tumble. However if Kadar joined forces with Husam and their conglomerate became one, their enterprise would become one of the largest in the world, thus boosting investor confidence, increasing the value of Crawford Enterprise and making Kadar's partners content.

"Damn! The merger!" Drew blurted. He threw his linen napkin on the table and called for his chauffeur to bring the car around.

Upstairs, Jason Crawford III, lean with a muscular torso and strong legs, dark blonde hair and thick eyebrows, was changing into his golf clothes. He had a master in entertainment technology and an MBA from Carnegie Mellon. His new girlfriend, Tiffany, was listening to the business news when she heard about Sahar. He was about to put on his lucky green socks when Jason heard Husam's name. "That's our client. I can't believe his wife died on their wedding night. Talk about a bad omen."

"That's what I call extremely bad luck," said Tiffany, lying underneath the cashmere blankets. Even with her lustrous brown mane, big breasts and curvy body, there was nothing particularly special about her. And just like Jason's prior girlfriends, she wasn't going to be around for long. He preferred variety, even if he did date similar-looking girls.

"I wonder if the merger is going to go through now," he said, more to himself than to Tiffany. "I'd better cancel my golf game, go to the office and make some calls," he added changing out of his golf clothes into pants with cuffed hems and a sports shirt, his usual weekend business attire.

"I guess we won't be going sailing this afternoon," she said. Jason didn't even hear her.

"If that merger doesn't go through, our stock could fall." He looked at Tiffany blankly. "Did you say something?"

"Never mind," she said and picked up the phone to call a male friend. Tiffany was not one to sit home and wait for her man. Men were simply entertainment. Her relationships were here today, gone tomorrow, and her family was her bank account. She was a lawyer at her father's firm but only put in half the time the other employees did.

In Riyadh, women like Tiffany caught in bed with men that weren't their husbands would be punished by the *mutawan*, the religious police of vice and virtue. The first part of punishment was anywhere from 60 to 490 lashes with a flexible leather whip. If

they had sex with a stranger, they would be stoned to death, perhaps drowned by a male family member or decapitated. The fate of all women, royalty or otherwise, was the same. The only difference between the rich and poor was that the former lived in a golden cage and the latter in a metal one. Affluent women were able to travel and have all the clothes, jewelry and chauffeurs they desired, but they still were at the mercy of their husbands, fathers and brothers. A woman was always considered the property of her husband or male guardian, and that male was allowed to treat her any way he wanted, even kill her without being prosecuted.

Only recently had the Saudi government issued ID cards to women, much to the dismay of hardliners who protested against women's faces being unveiled for their photos. The cards were issued to prevent fraud and embezzlement. Women used it to open bank accounts or to start a stock portfolio. The only problem was that the ID wasn't honored by many institutions. Oftentimes they sent the woman back and asked her to bring two male family members who could vouch for her. When a woman wanted to leave her house, she had to be escorted by a male relative. Traveling without a man's permission was forbidden.

Like all Saudi women, such was Sahar's fate as her situation worsened when she turned 22. According to Saudi tradition, she was too old to get married. Men preferred their women as young as one year old. There were no laws in Saudi Arabia defining the legal age for marriage. The prophet Mohammad was the model they followed. Aisha became his wife when she was six years of age, and the marriage was when she was nine. The younger a woman married, the better. She would be more subservient. Perhaps that was why it was too late for Sahar. She was too mature and independent to be subservient. Against her culture's popular belief that a woman's purpose in life was to bear sons, she expected more.

So often she had refused to leave her house, not wanting to be covered with an *abaya* – a black cloak covering the body from head to toe – with a head scarf and dark veil over her face. She thought it was unjust that she wasn't allowed to breathe the same

fresh air that men did, that she was forced to look at the beautiful blue sky through the blackness of her veil, and that while men fornicated before marriage, she had to be a virgin and was not allowed to have as many husbands as men were allowed to have wives. She often wondered *which god supported such cruelty toward women. Which god created such inequality among men and women? After all, weren't all humans supposed to be equal? How much of this inequality was religion and how much was it the interpretation of men of her culture?* She hadn't an answer but could no longer accept the life she was born into. She needed her *al horeyat* – her freedom.