

The Chain Diaries

Prologue

Evin House of Detention Northeast Tehran, Iran – March 1994

A prison guard snatched a black, cloth hood from Angela Nemazi's head, and her tired eyes blinked in the harsh glare of floodlights. She'd had very little sleep for the last few days, and it showed. Angie was the last in a line of six women. The girl at the front shuffled alongside a man in military fatigues. He had a hand encircling the back of her neck, guiding her. Each of those following had their right hand on the shoulder of the one before them. Bedraggled and barefoot, they walked in silence. The first five girls in line were in their late teens, early twenties, Angie was a little over thirty. The first five looked native to Iran, dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin. Angie was blonde, fair skinned and, even now, despite her tiredness, had blue piercing eyes. The women were all clothed in the same grey muslin dresses, no sleeves, ill fitting, and cut to ankle length. Their hair matted, bodies bruised, faces dirty, they kept their heads bowed, looking at the ground. Making eye contact with any of the guards would give them an excuse to lash out. Keeping her head low, she risked a glance around the courtyard, convinced her husband would be there to take her home. All she could see were four guards, watching them. *Why hadn't Ben come for her?* Something Fatima had said in the dormitory kept repeating over and over in her mind. *If they take you at night, you do not come back.*

A guard escorted the women to a truck in the centre of the square and they stood at the rear. Beside the truck, six flimsy wooden boxes, each about six feet long, eighteen inches wide and twelve deep. They had lids and these lay inside the boxes on the sandy floor.

The guard barked a command and the five Iranian girls each grabbed a rope handle and dragged a box towards the far end of the courtyard. There was one box left. Angie took the rope handle and followed them, dragging the box behind her.

For the first time, Angie saw, against the far wall of the courtyard, an A frame resembling children's swings. In place of a swing, there was a rope hanging down, six ropes in total. At the end of the rope, a noose and below that, on the ground, a small wooden stool. Realisation dawned and she understood the significance of the six boxes. She tried to move away from the group. Pleading, she appealed to a guard, but he hit her on the upper arm with a nightstick. Another guard led the six women to the A frame. A religious cleric, she hadn't noticed, in robes and wearing a turban, stood beside one end. He recited in Persian from a folder and a guard translated for Angie. He seemed to take great pleasure in repeating the words.

"You have been tried and found guilty of affiliation with the Mujahedin-e-Khalq. Punishment for this crime is death. We will inform your families."

The cleric said it in a matter of fact way, he showed no emotion. It took a moment to sink in. Each of the girls began to weep, pleading, struggling, but to no avail. Angie sank to her knees, sobbing. "It's not true. Please, find my husband."

A guard roughly grabbed her, told her to stand. Her legs weak, she leaned on the girl beside her. Fatima and Angie had become friends during Angie's incarceration. She grabbed her hand. A guard shouted at her, something unintelligible, and slapped their hands apart. He ignored their cries and forced each girl onto a stool below a noose. Their hands tied behind their backs and their heads covered by hoods. A guard forced Angie onto a stool. It wobbled as it bore her weight when she straightened up. He tied her hands and placed the muslin hood back over her head. She could smell her own foetid breath as she breathed out. She felt a noose go over her head and choked as it tightened on her neck. Teetering on the small stool, her heart now racing. Her desperate eyes, tried to make out anything through the cloth hood. Moving her head from left to right, panic stricken. She could see nothing but shadows. Her breathing becoming more and more ragged.

The cleric read a name from his folder and a guard kicked a stool out from under the first girl in line.

Hangings in Iran rely more on strangulation than neck breaking, the girl struggled, choking, her feet kicking, for more than a minute. The cleric

moved down the row of girls. One after another, the stools were kicked out from under them.

Angie, her heart beating faster and faster, she thought it might break through her chest. A pulse in her neck, irritated by the rope, loud in her ear. She could hear the cleric getting closer, could hear the other girls struggling, the ropes creaking under the weight. Her breathing became desperate as she heard the stool kicked from beneath the girl next to Fatima and heard her struggles. Angie's bladder gave way, and she pissed where she stood. She felt an irrational feeling of shame as the urine ran down her legs. She heard laughter from the guards, like it was a game. Soon, too soon, she heard Fatima's name called out. Fatima gave a squeal, followed by gurgling, gasping, choking sound, which, to Angie's ears, seemed to last an eternity. Then, there was only Angie left. In silence. Waiting. Her breathing coming in short, sharp bursts, tears rolling down her cheeks. She had been in Iran less than two weeks.