

BETRAYED

ESCAPE FROM IRAQ

LATIFA ALI WITH RICHARD SHEARS



PROLOGUE

By now the first of the snows were beginning to fall across the Zagros Mountains and the track was treacherous—steep ravines fell away to the fast-flowing Great Zab River, feeding the plains of Kurdistan below. Soon the paths through the mountain range would be impassable and with the temperature plunging to minus 10°C the freedom fighters would return to their towns and villages, knowing that the Iraqi troops—and the Iranians who were always trying to penetrate the border—would be doing the same. But that would be several weeks away and none of the freedom fighters, the Peshmerga, were ready to leave just yet.

A blanket wrapped around his traditional dark-khaki uniform, the guerrilla continued his climb to where he knew Khalid had positioned himself. Then he broke away from the path and began scaling the steep sides. Khalid would already have seen him from his sniper's position but he felt quite safe, for no Arab soldier would travel alone through this territory unless he was pretending to be a Kurdish fighter and that would be a suicidal mission.

'Khalid,' he called against the icy wind, 'Khalid, I've brought the news you've been waiting for.'

The sniper burst up from his rocky cover. His checkered scarf hid his grin as he lifted his head high into the falling snowflakes and cried: 'Allah be praised!'

Then he turned to the messenger. 'A boy? A girl?'

'I don't know, Khalid. This is the only word they've sent. There's a car waiting to take you back.'

Khalid was 28 years old and very fit. He did not waste a moment. With his Kalashnikov thumping against his back on its strap he slithered down the hill, hit the path and ran on down towards the plains. Several times he slipped and came close to falling into the ravine, but his excitement overrode the danger. Then he tripped again, rolled and when he picked himself up he discovered he had lost his shoes. He looked around for them but realised they must have gone over the edge.

Now it was his bare feet which carried him over the stones. Tiny smears of his blood stained the light covering of snow, but he did not care about the pain. He wanted to reach his baby.

The 100 kilometre car journey seemed endless. He urged the driver on—'go faster, faster!'—through the villages and then the streets of Mosul before at last they reached his home.

His 16-year-old wife, Baian, with the baby in her arms, smiled as he burst into the bedroom, where other female members of the family were gathered.

She held the baby up. 'Here is your daughter,' she said.

'Ah, so I have a girl,' said Khalid. He didn't care that his first born was not a boy. There would be plenty of time for that.

'Your feet,' whispered one of the women. 'You are bleeding. Where are your shoes?'

'Somewhere up on the mountain,' he said dismissively. 'It doesn't matter.'

But it did. The loss of his shoes was to shape the destiny of the

tiny baby girl he held so proudly in his arms on that cold November day in 1980.

ONE

I'm known as Latifa—'the gentle one'—now, although that's not the name my parents gave me. But dangers that came to surround me forced me to take on a new identity. Fear, threats and suffering—they are nothing new to me or my people, the Kurds, who for centuries have struggled to keep out invaders and have their independence recognised.

In the decades before I came into the world—and before Saddam Hussein began his own brutal oppression in the 1980s—the Kurdish people, who make up about 20 per cent of Iraq's 20 million population, had suffered persecution under Iraq's former leader, President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr. By the time Saddam Hussein placed al-Bakr under house arrest and declared himself president in 1979, my father was a fierce and respected member of that honoured group of Kurdish freedom fighters, the Peshmerga.

And how he was needed. There had been fierce clashes between

the Iraqi army and the guerrillas in 1977, but in the following two years hundreds of Kurdish villages were razed to the ground and more than 200,000 Kurds were deported to other parts of the country. I never found out how many soldiers my father killed up there in the mountains—I've seen him shoot and I know how good he is—and I know he would have been a one-man force to be reckoned with.

But now he was even more of a man among his peers. He was a father. And his bride, his wife, my mother, was among the most beautiful women in Iraq; blonde, green eyed and shapely, men would have killed for her hand but my father's family claimed her for him when she was just 15.

Baian was born in Dohuk, the name of which means 'small village', but with a population today of half a million it is anything but small. With the mountains and the Tigris River nearby, it is an attractive city and its university is recognised as one of the best in the region. But my mother's loveliness denied her any university education—in fact, her family were so concerned that she might be molested or raped by government agents who search towns and villages for attractive girls and women—that was the life—that they even kept her home from school. She became a prisoner of her beauty.

It was her father who gave Baian her education because he was a teacher and she had the added advantage of learning from her three brothers and four sisters when they came home from school. But while her early teenage years put her ahead of her peers as a scholar, she was never allowed to mix with girls of her own age.

My mother's and my father's families were distantly related through my great-great-grandmother, which was agreeable to everyone for it meant that when Baian and Khalid married the 'good genes' were passed on. The wedding, like all Kurdish ceremonies,

was a grand affair, with singing and dancing and much merriment and then the couple retired to their room. This was where the bride would give herself to her husband and heaven forbid any woman who was found not to be a virgin. Just as in other households, his mother and his oldest brother waited outside Baian' and Khalid's bedroom door for the moment when Khalid emerged. Then they went in and, taking no notice of the bride, inspected the bed. They were looking for 'the blood on the cloth'. Yes, she was a true virgin and Khalid, well, he was now a man among men. Music was played, baklava was served. There was great rejoicing.

My father was to tell me years later, when I was old enough to understand, that he came to truly love my mother, although to this day I believe this is all the wrong way around and that love must come first. However, this was the Kurdish region of northern Iraq and that was the way things were.

Like his young bride, Khalid was well educated. He was born in Mosul, the regional capital, Iraq's fourth largest city and some 40 miles to the south of my mother's city of Dohuk, and shortly after leaving high school he worked hard at setting up his own welding business. All his employees were family members and the business flourished, so his bride and the family they would raise were guaranteed a good start to life.

As is the way, Khalid and Baian's marital home was his family's house, a three-storey building in the middle of the city. It was crowded, because they shared it with Khalid's parents, his seven sisters and a brother. And it was expected of the new bride that she would be a slave to the whole family, doing the cooking, washing and cleaning. She had moved from one domestic prison before her marriage to another as a new bride.

After three months Baian found herself pregnant with me. Again, it was a victory for Khalid. Now he was free to return to

the mountains with the Peshmerga, for whom he had been fighting before his marriage, leaving his relatives to run the welding business. His wife was pregnant and while she coped with that he could fight for Kurdish independence until the time came when his baby was born. During those summer months he dressed himself in the traditional Peshmerga clothing of baggy harem pants and a khaftan top, while around his waist was a wide black belt in which he carried his ammunition and his dagger.

I learned from my mother how I was raised in my first few months. Like all children I was strapped very tightly into a cot so I wouldn't fall out as they rocked it back and forth. I've looked at family photos of my mother holding me and seen the smile on my father's face as he gazed at me. But there is one photo that I'll never forget. It shows me, still a baby, giggling at the camera my father is aiming at me—but my mother, who is holding me in her arms, is glaring at me. I've studied it so many times over the years and wondered whether, from those very early months of my life, Baian had seen me as a burden. I've tried to pass it off as a trick of the camera, one of those unguarded moments where an expression is not a true reflection of feelings, but I'm convinced now that the photo caught the truth.

There is no doubt that my mother suffered among her husband's sisters. Her beauty was outstanding and there would have been intense jealousy among her sisters-in-law. She put up with the ill-feeling, although she rebelled when the demands on her became too much.

'I've got a baby to care for,' she told the others. 'I can't wait hands and foot on you all as well.'

But Khalid insisted that she had to do what was asked of her. It was the way.

Baian gave birth to my brother when I was two. It seemed that despite her education and her fine looks she was destined to a life

of domesticity, growing old, surrounded by children and ageing relatives. But dramatic events lay ahead that were to change all our lives in a way we could never have imagined.

Six months after my brother Bawar was born—in 1982—a close and trusted friend of my father who had connections with the Iraqi government gave him information that terrified him. Ten families had been singled out for execution by Saddam Hussein's troops, or agents. When caught, the families would be driven into the desert and shot. My family was among them.

'But how do they know about me?' asked Khalid 'I don't believe any of my people will have betrayed me.'

What he then learned devastated him. Inside one of his shoes which he had lost on the mountain more than two years earlier, was a piece of paper containing his name and his family's address. Most of the militia carried this single piece of identification with them so that if they were killed, their colleagues—who would not always know everyone's name—could inform their family of the death. The shoe with that incriminating piece of paper had apparently been found by Saddam's men. To my father's name they had added mine, my mother's, and my baby brother's.

There was now no choice. My parents had to flee Kurdistan. Those on Saddam's hit list contacted one another and escape routes were planned. It was suggested to my father that we should leave with a group of four other families—my father's relatives, meanwhile, would leave the family home and stay with cousins in other parts of Kurdistan. But as for travelling with four other families, he was against it.

'We'll go on our own,' he told the others. He refused to listen to warnings that there was safety in numbers.

We left under cover of darkness, driven by friends to the foot of the mountains and then I was loaded onto a donkey—I was but

only two and have my parents' recollections of that journey. My father had always said that the mountains were the best friends of the Kurds, for they provided a barrier from any invaders and if you knew them, they were the best place to hide. And my father knew them well. We had to travel by night for safety but the hours of darkness were already bitterly cold, for it was autumn and the temperature was approaching zero.

My mother carried Bawar on her shoulders, following behind the donkey with me on its back and my father leading it from the front. Our destination was Iran, where my father had relatives in the capital, Tehran. Thankfully there was a reasonable telephone link between Mosul and Tehran and my father had been able to put a call through to say we were leaving Kurdistan. The journey through the mountains was expected to take 15 days and at the Iranian end we would have to bypass any Customs posts, for we had no passports. There were isolated villages that we reached in a kind of no-man's-land, where we were given food and shelter during the day and a chance to sleep. After all, these were people that, in his role as a militia my father had protected from pockets of marauding Iraqi troops. Sometimes, though, there were no places to stay and we had to rest in a tent and even caves. My father had prepared us well for the journey, but there was no telling how fate would play a part and almost bring about a disaster. We were about half way through the journey when the donkey lost its footing.

Luckily, I was strapped on or I would have been thrown into a ravine to my death. But the donkey was half over the edge, with its lead still in my father's hands, and it was only his incredible strength and fitness that was holding it back from a fatal plunge. But he couldn't pull the donkey back. Another few seconds and he wouldn't be able to hold on.

My mother reached over the squealing, terrified animal and

managed to pull me free. Now the donkey's lead was wrapped around my father's hand, the weight of the animal tightening the strap and making it impossible to free himself. They were both going to fall. But he was able to pull out his knife and sever the leash, saving himself but he could not prevent the poor donkey from falling to its death. Years later, Khalid was to tell me that there was no question what he would have done—if it came to it, he would have given his life to save me.

My parents continued that terrifying journey—for who knew who was watching us?—towards Iran. We passed through an area Khalid's relatives had revealed to us as being safe from border guards and, equally importantly, mines. We were picked up from the outskirts of a frontier village and driven to Tehran. We were safe. But within days my father was breaking down in tears. In a phone call to friends in Mosul he learned that the other families we were asked to travel with had all been caught making their escape and had been executed. His tears were of sadness for them and relief for us all because his instincts—and his knowledge of the mountains—had saved his family.

We could not return to Kurdistan for the foreseeable future. We were refugees. As my parents settled me and my brother in with my father's relatives they discussed our future. It seemed that Iran, now at war with Iraq, was not prepared to accept us. Years later, in the mid 1980s, Iran was to give its support to the Peshmerga, but in the meantime my parents decided to keep a low profile as far as the authorities were concerned. Through human rights groups they discovered their options. We might be able to find a new home in several countries that had shown a willingness to accept refugees from Kurdistan, including some of the Scandinavian nations and Poland. We had many relatives in Sweden—no less than 16 families, all related in one way or another—and that was

my parents' choice. But it was not to be. Arrangements were made for us to be transferred to Poland and from there we could seek an onward destination.

My parents haven't told me much about our sojourn in Poland except to tell me that we were in limbo there for more than a year. By now my father had a passport, with his wife, my brother and I sharing the identity page. Applications were made to settle in several Western countries; then the Australians offered us a home as migrants. By now it was 1983 and Kurdistan was in turmoil. It was in that year that the Kurdish Democratic Party, led by Massoud Barzani, was at the forefront of an Iranian thrust into northern Iraq and many people were being killed or displaced. As if the Kurds had not suffered enough through the earlier clashes with the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga, when tens of thousands of people were forced into other parts of the country. Terrible reports were reaching the West of genocide being carried out by Saddam Hussein's troops, who were also engaged in the war with Iran. Not only are the Kurds ethnically closer to the Iranians, the main reason for Saddam's hatred for the people of the north was the fact that the Kurds were fighting side by side with Iran's Revolutionary Guard against the Iraqi leader's forces.

In addition, there was the ongoing conflict between Kurdish rebels in neighbouring Turkey and that country's army, as the push for self rule by the Kurds across that whole region intensified. To add to the confusion, thousands of Turkish Kurd refugees poured across the border into Kurdistan. Who knows what the fate of my family would have been had we not fled, even if we had been able to avoid the execution warrant that had been issued against us.

My family was among the first wave of Kurdish refugees to be accepted by Australia and it was thanks to my father's skills in engineering that we were given the privilege. What followed was

the arrival of many thousands of Kurds, who were settled into the western suburbs of Sydney and the northern areas of Melbourne. By the time all the arrangements had been made, the interviews with officials concluded, paperwork completed, I was five years old when we arrived in Australia. I look at photographs these days and see how my father in particular would spoil me with toys. There I am sitting on a rug surrounded by dolls and other playthings, both in Poland and after our arrival in Australia. He doted over me.

Unlike refugees who jump the queue and end up in detention camps, we were provided with an apartment in the western suburb of Liverpool. My father had already had a job lined up, as a consultant and engineer at a welding factory. Other Kurds were moving into the region and a small community began to build up. In time, we moved to another apartment, which was in a quieter area and where we had access to a swimming pool. My parents could already speak English—don't forget, my mother had a brilliant education from her father, a teacher, and my own father was well educated, too—and when we were at home they spoke in both Kurdish and English. So my early childhood was privileged in that I learned both languages.

I was enrolled in the Liverpool junior public school, where there were a mixture of children from other countries—Chinese, Italians, Greeks, Lebanese. I was the only Iraqi girl, and other students, not even having heard of Kurdistan, thought that I was Italian. One day, when a Lebanese girl asked where I was from and I told her she said: 'Oh, you're one of us, then.' But I had come from a proud Kurdish family and I quickly pointed out to her that the Kurds are like no others in that region—we were ethnically different and had our own language and dialects.

My mother was adamant that we should cling to our heritage.

'Do not mix with Arabs when you meet them,' she would tell me

time and again. 'While we are from northern Iraq, we are different. Always remember that. I don't want you to be fanatical about it, but always remember who you are, where you are from.'

While my mother had implored me not to be fanatical, she was obsessed with doing whatever she could to help the Kurds, both in Australia and in Iraq. She started working for a Kurdish radio station, reading the news in three different dialects and also writing her own poetry and reading that out, too. People would say to me: 'Your mother is very talented—she's a news reader and an entertainer all rolled into one.'

She was also a woman of contrasts as far as the Kurds were concerned. While she went out of her way to help newcomers settle in and give advice over the radio—even taking people to hospital by taxi if the need arose and asking nothing in return—she didn't like us mingling with the Kurdish community in general, unless it was for special events, such as newroz—New Year's Day—but which marks the time in 612 BC that the Kurds' existence was first recognised when the ancestors of today's Kurdish people rose up against the Assyrian empire.

Baian was still a very beautiful woman but as often happens, her blonde hair had now darkened and taken on a reddish sheen. But she turned men's heads wherever she went. Even in my younger years I could see how they were attracted to her. And I could see how, as the months rolled by, my parents began to see less and less of each other. While she ran back and forth from the house, caring for us children when we were home from school and going to the radio station, my father was always absent except for late in the evening. His job as both a worker and a consultant was very demanding and it was only at weekends that we were able to be united as a family. We might go to the beach at Cronulla or sit on the banks of the George's River for a picnic.

While these were peaceful scenes, my parents were distressed at the news that was pouring out of Kurdistan—news that my mother in her role at the radio station was among the first to hear. In mid-March 1988, Saddam Hussein unleashed his most evil weapon of mass destruction against the Kurds, using poison gas on the town of Halabja, killing up to 5000 people and leaving thousands more to die of terrible complications, such as disease and birth defects for years afterwards. Human Rights Watch declared the attack as an act of genocide and to this day it is the biggest chemical weapons attack against any civilian-populated area. My parents were devastated—but remained thankful that their relatives were out of reach of the gas clouds.

It was when I began my senior education at Liverpool Girls High School that my mother implored my father to find us a new home. There were, she complained, too many Middle Eastern people moving into the district. Looking back on that time I can see that it was a strange kind of racism but because I was still young I didn't see anything wrong in her comments. In any case, we moved to an apartment in nearby Chipping Norton, which my father was able to purchase on a mortgage because his wages from the factory were very good.

Among the girls I befriended at high school was another Kurd—her family knew mine. As she was a newcomer my mother asked me to look after her, guide her around, show her where she could buy nice clothes. My mother even helped the family financially and told me that I should remember to do the same thing for other Kurds if they needed help. It was curious that while she did not want to mix with them, she went out of her way to help them, like a shadowy benefactor. I've come to realise, though—oh, how I have realised—that her reluctance to keep her distance was due to the idle gossip that began as soon as her back was turned. She had had enough of it

in Iraq, the unceasing chatter about this family and that, how much they earned, what kind of furniture they had, how they got on with their children or this cousin or that aunty.

In any case, I did as my mother asked and helped the new girl, Sheireen, who was among a group of some 50 families who had arrived in Australia in 1992 following more uprisings in the north and south of Iraq in the wake of the Gulf War. I told Sheireen that if anyone bullied her, if she needed any help whatsoever, she could come to me. I introduced her to teachers, to my school friends, helped her buy the best learning books, to say no to drugs, who to avoid. Although she could speak English—she had picked it up in a refugee camp before arriving in Australia—she was still in great need of guidance and I was there for her. How it hurts me now to think of the betrayal that was to come. By her and so many others.