

What People Are Saying about Mani Erfan and *True Wealth...*

“Mani Erfan’s book *True Wealth* is a rare gem! It is full of riveting, inspiring, and encouraging testimonies, case studies, and wise counsel from end to end. Like a great business or entrepreneur, it under-promises and over-delivers. It’s just the shot in the arm or kick in the butt that many of us need to let go of our excuses, get out of our comfort zones, and pursue our God-given dreams and destinies. It’s the best book I have read in a long time. Buy it. Read it. Do it.”

—Dr. Bruce Cook

Chairman and CEO, VentureAdvisers, Inc.
Kingdom House Publishing
Kingdom Congressional International Alliance
Seattle, WA

“Intriguing and inspiring! In fact, I found myself thinking, *This book would be a great storyline for a movie.* It is filled with many compelling true-life stories. There are great analogies, as well as motivating and thought-provoking themes. This book is not written from the high tower of theoretical ideas, but from the real-life experiences of a man who’s proven that there are no challenges or obstacles in life that cannot be overcome by the abounding grace of God. Mani is uniquely gifted in both business and ministry. His passion for the Lord fills him with a compassion for people that drives him with an unparalleled energy. As you read *True Wealth*, I am certain you will find yourself deeply encouraged and motivated in your own life. You, too, can become a catalyst for success!”

—Doug Stringer

Founder, Somebody Cares America/International
Turning Point Ministries International
Author, *Leadership Awakening* and *In Search of a Father’s Blessing*

“Have you had difficult challenges? How about escape from Iran, near false imprisonment, numerous business missteps, battling giants! Mani offers a no-fluff practical guide with clear and proven strategic business guidelines to transform your “impossible” into *True Wealth*. Nothing to millions—it can happen for you. This is a must-read as we enter God’s wealth transfer season.”

—Dr. Erik A. Kudlis
CEO, Erik’s Design Build Associates, Inc.

“Mani Erfan’s *True Wealth* provides compelling and invaluable insights on the challenges, risks, and rewards of following Christ in business and in life. Captivating, encouraging, and inspiring—this book is a message of hope, encouragement, and redemption.”

—Douglas F. Wall
Author, *Redemption: God’s Power to Reach the Least,
the Last and the Lost*
Managing Director, Life Ventures
Cofounder, PureForge
San Diego, CA

“Mani’s escape from Iran, engineered by his daring father, is breathtaking. That by itself is an interest magnet to read this book. But there is more, much more! Once a Muslim and now a powerful man of God, Mani is boldly raising up a new generation of Christian pioneers in Iran and in other suppressed eastern and Middle Eastern countries. He has no fear and walks the talk that, with God, all things are possible. Mani is immensely successful in business, richly anointed by the Holy Spirit, and firmly confident in his identity. This book will stimulate you and stir your Spirit to soar where you have not gone before!”

—Frank Amedia
Pastor, Touch Heaven Ministries
Canfield, OH

TRUE
WEALTH

TRUE WEALTH

HOW TO FULFILL YOUR DREAMS
WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SOUL

MANI ERFAN



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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PART 1:
THE UNICAT STORY

1

EVERY STORY HAS A BEGINNING

I have always dreamed of owning my own business. The idea took root in my heart before I reached my teenage years. I was born in a modern household in Tehran, Iran, when the country was still ruled by the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah in Iran's monarchy. Under the shah, the country was far more westernized than it is today. We had Western clothes, hairstyles, and modern music.

My father, Iraj Erfan, was born in the Soviet Union but immigrated to Iran with his family at a very young age. He became a professional soccer player and an Olympian star, playing on Iran's national soccer team. After my father retired from athletics, he joined

the newly created Iranian Airlines and became a very successful and sought-after pilot. My mother, Behjat Shakibi, an Iranian, was born to Kurdish parents in northern Iran. Her father was a highly educated man who taught himself to speak French and Arabic in the early 1920s, when most people in Iran couldn't read or write.

My childhood was an exciting adventure. As a pilot, my father was awarded free airline tickets for his family to travel the world. I visited the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Japan, and Italy before I turned twelve years old. My parents considered themselves Muslim, but my religious upbringing was negligible. My only spiritual influence was my devout Muslim grandmother, who took care of me when my parents traveled together. I clearly remember her praying the Muslim prayer five times a day every time I stayed with her.

My hardworking parents expected excellence from me, and I worked hard to deliver. By the time I became a teenager, I spoke fluent English, played classical piano, and trained daily to qualify for the Iranian youth tennis team. I was never a rebellious child, and although I had no serious religious training, I was taught to be a moral person, knowing right from wrong. My life goal was to be successful and to do everything I could to make my parents proud.

The Islamic Revolution

Life in Iran changed dramatically in early 1979. After a thirty-year reign, Shah Pahlavi and his family fled the country. Pahlavi was Iran's last shah of the 2,500-year monarchical rule, dating back to the founding of the Persian Empire. It was a cataclysmic change for the Iranian people. Some of us were affected more than others.

At the time the shah fled, the Islamic spiritual leader, Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini, returned from exile in Europe to bring fundamental Islam and Sharia law to Iran. On April 1, 1979, Iran was officially declared an Islamic Republic.

The advent of the Islamic revolution changed everything in my life. My world was turned upside down. At thirteen years old, I went from a free lifestyle with little religious influence to being smothered by the Islamic faith and culture and required to follow all its teachings, whether I liked them or not. We were immersed in religious fervor and baptized in stringent Islamic rules that affected every aspect of our lives. How we dressed, what we ate, what music we could listen to, what movies we could watch, which people we could associate with—every detail of our lives was under a microscope.

For the first time in my life, rebellion flared up within me. I didn't want to blindly follow all the Islamic beliefs and regulations. I protested every step of the way. If the government wanted me to cut my hair short, I wanted to keep it long. If they forbade me to wear short pants, I would put them on and walk out the door. When all styles of music were banned by Ayatollah Khomeini for a short time in the early 1980s, I played my piano even louder. I was running headlong toward trouble, and, if I wasn't careful, I would find myself locked in a prison cell somewhere deep in Iran.

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The most painful part of the revolution was watching my lifelong dream of studying in the United States evaporate before my eyes. In 1979, a group of radical Islamic students overran the US embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two American citizens hostage for four hundred

forty-four days. Political relations between Iran and the United States, once friendly, were now shattered.

Desperate to Escape

Things came to a head for me in 1983. Although the US hostages had been released two years earlier, Iran was in the middle of a war with Saddam Hussein and Iraq—a war it is still ill-prepared to fight. By then, I was sixteen years old, a junior in high school, and desperately looking for a way to escape Iran and my mandatory conscription into the Iranian Army.

Under the ayatollah, every able-bodied eighteen-year-old male was required to serve two years in the military. The war was raging on, and Saddam Hussein, in defiance of international law, was using chemical weapons on the front lines. The Iranian army was scrambling for a strategy to win the war. Desperate to push the Iraqi army out of occupied territories, Iran used human wave attacks, just throwing young fighters by the thousands into battle. This led to massive and devastating casualties.

Young men that I had known since early childhood were sent to the front lines and never came back, or they returned severely maimed by chemical burns and other horrors of war. Many of them, filled with tremendous zeal for the Islamic Revolution and its fanatic leader Khomeini, went willingly to battle. However, casualties were high—about ten to fifteen thousand Iranian soldiers died per engagement, and there was always a shortage of able-bodied men. My prospects of surviving a two-year stint in the Iranian armed forces were grim.

My choices in life were frightening: either be drafted and die in the war or be thrown into a prison cell, ending up standing in front of a firing squad for constantly acting out against the revolution.

But there was a dangerous third option. I could leave Iran immediately. My parents were convinced that they could no longer protect me, but how would I escape? All young Iranian men, sixteen years

and older, were forbidden to leave the country until they had military discharge papers, and that was clearly not an option for me!

A Father's Unconditional Love

Daily, I begged my parents to find a way for me to escape. The most commonly used scheme for fleeing Iran was taking an overland route to Turkey aided by smugglers. This choice was extremely dangerous, as the smugglers traveled through treacherous mountain passages and were often caught by the Iranian border police. Any form of military engagement had deadly consequences for both the smuggler and the one being smuggled. To make matters worse, even if I made it across the border, I would be a nation-less refugee in a foreign land without a legal passport. I would be forced to remain in Turkey for years and likely fail to gain permission to immigrate to my ultimate destination—the United States of America.

Was there another option? The dangers I faced were frightfully real. Each day, feelings of hopelessness grew.

I can still clearly remember my parents' nightly arguments about the best way to help me. Then, in the middle of the conflict, my father devised a radical plan for my escape. His actions on my behalf the summer of 1983 were incredible feats of courage and self-sacrifice, the full expression of a father's love for his only son, without any concern for his own well-being.

During his years flying for Iran Air, my father had gained recognition as one of the most skilled pilots in the country, which made him a valuable asset to the Iranian government and the captain who was always chosen to fly influential government leaders to international conferences. It was during one of those sensitive flights in June 1983, when my father flew the speaker of the Iranian Parliament and other statesmen to a neighboring Arab country, that he made his courageous move.

Sitting on the runway of the Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran, the aircraft was positioned for takeoff, with an armed military

guard in the cockpit and the who's who of Iranian political leadership in the cabin. Without warning, my father taxied the plane to the left. He blocked the runway, refusing to take off and demanding to speak to the most important passenger onboard, speaker of the Parliament, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

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Pandemonium erupted in the cockpit. The armed guard thrust his gun into the back of my father's head, demanding that he take off immediately. Without flinching, my father shouted back, "I will not fly until I speak to Ayatollah Rafsanjani." He turned to his copilot, who sat paralyzed with fear, and forbade him to take any action as long as he remained the captain.

Within moments, the news reached the passengers, and there was panic as they braced for a terrorist attack. Military guards raced to the cockpit and surrounded my father with guns cocked. Still he demanded to speak to Ayatollah Rafsanjani.

In spite of protests for his safety, Ayatollah Rafsanjani walked into the cockpit to personally talk to my father. After calming the guards, Rafsanjani was short and to the point.

"I understand that you wish to see me, Captain?" Rafsanjani said with steely precision. "What can I do for you?"

“Mr. Rafsanjani, I am sorry that I had to get your attention this way,” my father replied respectfully, “but I have been trying to reach you at your office for months without success, and this is my only chance to speak with you.”

“Tell me, Captain, what is so important that you would recklessly cause all of this commotion and make many of our friends nervous for their lives?”

“Mr. Rafsanjani, I have a son, and he is my only son. He is bright, very intelligent, and has dreamed of studying abroad. I know that many young men are risking their lives fighting for our country, but I am asking for your permission for my son to legally leave Iran to pursue his studies. You never know, sir; if you save his life today, one day he may save the lives of many of his countrymen.”

“Is this all you need, Captain? Was all of this about your son?”

“Yes, sir. May I have your word that you will allow him to leave? I am serving my country, and I will continue to do so as long as I am needed.”

“Yes, Captain Erfan,” Rafsanjani’s replied. “Upon our return, please come to my office, and I will have the paperwork for you to get your son’s passport. I will even grant him a government scholarship to help defray the cost of his studies. Now, can we get this plane off the ground? Our friends are waiting for us.”

My father should have been arrested on the spot, dragged off to Evin Prison, Iran’s most notorious prison, and never heard from again. Fortunately, that did not happen. In moments, the crisis was averted. In today’s world of terrorism, it is hard to believe that after my father’s demands, the Iranian leaders still entrusted him with their safety in the air! He flew them without further incident to their destination and home again.

There was great celebration in the Erfan home upon my father’s return the next day. I had permission to legally leave the country! I

would not have to face the treacherous mountain paths to Turkey or the Iraqi soldiers in war. I could pursue my education and my dreams. One week later, separated from my family, I watched Iran disappear slowly from sight as I headed to my new destiny. My father's sacrifice ultimately cost him his job and, for a short time, his freedom, but it gave me life and the chance to live out my destiny and my calling.

The sacrifice of a father became life to his son.