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(OR HOW TO SURVIVE IN
A SECRET SYRIAN
TERRORIST PRISON)

A MEMOIR

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THE FIRST AMERICAN EVER TO ESCAPE AL QAEDA

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PRAISE FOR *THE DAWN PRAYER*

“Captured by al-Qaeda in Syria, Matt Schrier essentially played a long game of chess with them—and won. He escaped from their torture chambers and went on to write one of the most terrifying and suspenseful books I’ve ever read. This is an absolutely extraordinary story.”

—**SEBASTIAN JUNGER, AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST**

“A tightly told story of brutal survival, unexpected friendships and ultimate escape . . . Matt’s engrossing story took me back to those days of struggle and survival and the desperate need for freedom.”

—**BILLY HAYES, AUTHOR OF *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS***

“This gripping memoir tells the incredible story of American photographer Matthew Schrier’s abduction from the battle-scarred streets of Aleppo by the al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra. It’s a searing narrative of personal courage and the determination to survive. Schrier takes us inside the hellish world of secret Syrian prisons and his daring escape from his jihadist captors. He also paints a brutally frank portrait of the unexpected friendships and hostilities he formed with his fellow captives.”

—**PHILIP S. BALBONI, CEO AND CO-EXECUTIVE EDITOR OF
DAILYCHATTER AND FOUNDER OF GLOBALPOST**

“*The Dawn Prayer* by Matthew Schrier is a thrilling documentary that reads like a novel. His account of being captured by al-Qaeda and held by some of the most savage and ruthless enemies of all, while being undermined and betrayed by one of his own, exhibits his fortitude, bravery, and cunning abilities to extend his life and someday hope to escape or be rescued. His words transport you to the places of manmade hell where survival is earned every day. Physical torture and mental abuse was the order of most days with very little food and water for survival. The fact that he, as a Jewish photographer, survived to tell his story is amazing enough, but his escape to freedom was nothing short of miraculous.

Take a deep breath before you begin reading; there is no breathing room in the pages of this one!”

—**A.B. GRANTHAM, COMMANDANT, DEPARTMENT OF ALABAMA,
MARINE CORPS LEAGUE**

“If I ever had a chance to pick a guide to walk through hell, that would be, no doubt, Matt Schrier, whose gifted hand is able to tame the dreadful memories of his darkest hours in captivity into the most clear, powerful, and enlightening narrative.”

—**JUAN RÍOS, SPANISH MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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MATTHEW SCHRIER



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The events, locations and conversations in this book, while true, are re-created from the author's memory. However, the essence of the story and the feelings and emotions evoked are intended to be accurate representations. In certain instances, names of persons, organizations, and places have been changed to protect an individual's privacy.

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*To all my friends who never made it home, the few who did, and those who
risked their lives to get me here.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The events described in this book aren't always pretty, and neither is my language. At times, the person you will meet in the following pages is not a reflection of who I really am on the inside, but who I had to become on the outside in order to adapt to my surroundings and survive with my dignity. I may sometimes be harsh, but harsh environments sometimes call for harsh measures. That's war. At least I'm honest about it.

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Somebody told me a joke once, when I was over there . . .

Three al-Qaeda guards enter a cell packed with regime POWs and take five men from the room. They bring them into the cell next door and line them up. After a few minutes, one of the rising stars of the organization, General Mohammad, arrives to deliver a message:

“I’m going to kill every one of you,” he says. “I am going to cut your heads off one at a time.” And then he leaves.

Two days later he comes for the first soldier, and the day after that the second. Four days later the third, and then three days following that the fourth, until there’s one lone soldier standing in the room, waiting to die. Finally, after five more long days of waiting, General Mohammad comes to collect his last victim.

The prisoner is blindfolded, bound, taken upstairs, outside, and placed in the trunk space of an SUV—while being taunted the entire way.

“Are you ready to die?” General Mohammad asks again and again. “Are you ready to get your head cut off?”

As the vehicle moves through Aleppo, the prisoner pants, prays, cries, and sweats until he’s soaked in his own tears and perspiration, and all the while the taunting never stops. At last, after about an hour of this, they reach their destination. The prisoner is taken from the trunk, marched into a building, down a flight of stairs, and locked, still blindfolded, in a room. When General Mohammad enters with his camp, he places his lips next to the soldier’s ear.

“Are you ready?” he asks one last time, in a cold whisper. “Are you ready to get your head cut off?”

And all of a sudden the blindfold is ripped from the soldier’s eyes—revealing all four of the friends who were taken from the cell before him: alive and well, with their heads still attached.

“Just kidding!” yells General Mohammad, breaking into a wild laugh.

. . . Welcome to Syria.

KARM AL-JABAL

DECEMBER 31, 2012

New Year's Eve and still alive, I thought with a smile. I sat in a run-down taxi in front of the driver's house, waiting for him to come out and staring at the last cigarette in my pack. I'd planned on saving it to smoke it after I'd safely crossed the border back to Turkey, a superstitious habit I'd gotten into, but since the driver was taking so long I just lit up. Anyway, I was headed out of Syria for the last time.

I had been in and around Aleppo for eighteen days photographing the war from the Free Syrian Army's side, and now that I had what I came for, it was time to go. It was my second time in the region but my first covering a war, and I didn't want to push my luck. About a month and a half earlier I'd been in southern Turkey and Jordan photographing refugees for the Syrian American Medical Society. During that trip I made my first pilgrimage across the border into Syria to feel things out, and met all the contacts I would need to return and travel deeper inside the country, from fixers to rebels.

Photography had never really been a passion of mine, just something I was good at. What I loved was history, and traveling; hoping to find a career that combined what I was good at with what I loved brought me to Syria, after a year spent crossing the globe to test my abilities both with a camera and to communicate with people who didn't understand a word I said. Recording history turned out to be something that came naturally to me, especially in a war zone.

I'd spent the day before in the Karm al-Jabal district of Aleppo, where some of the heaviest fighting in the country was under way. It was like nothing I had experienced so far, which is saying something, since I'd spent two and a half days outside the besieged Air Force Intelligence Directorate, or *Jawiyya*, at the time considered the most dangerous place in the city. Karm al-Jabal had been literally reduced to rubble, and I made my way to the front that morning with two FSA (Free Syrian Army) soldiers who were carrying giant blue jugs of water

to the fighters. It felt like we were walking through Stalingrad; there wasn't a building untouched by bullets or bombs. As we walked I noticed a woman in a black burka about two hundred yards away, standing in the middle of a street that was almost impassable due to all the downed poles, electrical wires, chunks of concrete, and other debris. After a quick exchange of yelling in Arabic between the rebels I was with and the woman in black, I snapped a shot of her walking into one of the doorways. I couldn't believe people were still living there.

The front was probably a five-minute walk from where I was staying at FSA headquarters, but with all the precautions taken to avoid getting shot at it probably took close to fifteen minutes to get there. We had to stick to the sides of some buildings to keep out of range of snipers' scopes and jet past others because there was no cover, but finally, after cutting through a factory and heading up some stairs, we arrived at the front, the top floor of an abandoned apartment building. Three of the most badass-looking FSA soldiers I had ever seen were sitting in front of a wood-burning stove. The first one who caught my attention was stunning to look at. He had dark skin and a black scarf wrapped around his entire face, revealing only these bright green eyes that glowed like emeralds and brought a certain elegance to the scene of carnage.

Nobody there spoke English. As soon as I arrived, they all jumped to their feet to greet me and offer coffee or tea. I declined, being that thanks to my nerves I already had to piss so bad it was practically coming out of my ears. When I looked out the window I noticed two small kids—maybe eight or ten years old—standing on the rooftop across the street from us, watching the fighting. They were surrounded by nothing but rubble and again I couldn't believe people were still living in this section of the city.

The other two jihadis sitting with Emerald Eyes looked just as badass, but not as pretty. One gave the impression of being huge—he was only about my height, 5'11", but much bulkier. Almost immediately he ran off and returned holding a digital camera, handing it over to show me the pictures. From the look of this guy I thought I was about to see some really horrific shit on that camera, but I don't remember any of the images so it couldn't have been that bad. The third jihadi had the least imposing presence, just a skinny kid with long hair, but he made up for that with zeal.

"*Yala,*" he said creeping over to the window with his AK-47. *Let's go.*

One of the rebels who'd carried the water set me up against a wall on the side of the room that was out of the line of fire—or would be unless they shot through the walls, which was very possible. As soon as I was in position I gave

him a nod and raised my camera. I just held my finger on the button while the jihadi stuck his skinny arms out of the window, letting loose a short burst of gunfire without even sticking his head out to aim. Then he pulled back to the rear of the room, and in less than a second we heard the return fire, bullets hitting the building right outside the window. Assad's soldiers were close, really close. The water carrier gave me a look as this happened that said: *You wanted to go to the front, and now you're here.* I was so jacked up I felt my leg starting to jump.

Now it was the Big Man's turn. He led me up the stairs to the roof, where the water carrier placed me in a snug corner that gave me cover from the regime along with a view of the whole top of the building. The water carrier ducked back down a few steps as the Big Man crouched and crept to the center of the roof with a homemade hand grenade. He'd let me hold the explosive, which was about one-quarter the size of a stick of dynamite but heavy, being packed with nails and bolts. As he lit the grenade, I raised my camera and just held my finger down on the button again. It took a second for the fuse to catch, and once it did the Big Man stood there for a moment watching it burn, waiting, so the enemy wouldn't have time to toss it back after it landed. As he cocked back I watched on the camera, one frame at a time, until he launched it onto the rooftop of the building where the regime boys were holed up.

BOOM! The sound tore through my ears, but my finger never left the button, especially once I saw him pull another explosive out of his pocket and light it up. This time I was able to capture the grenade in midair after it left his hand while he was in full swing, arm flung in an arc across the sky. By the time we heard the second explosion we were all hurrying back down the stairs, but the noise left my head ringing nevertheless. I couldn't understand how these guys could still hear.

Emerald Eyes was waiting for me at the bottom of the steps, black scarf still wrapped neatly around his face, holding a machine gun that probably weighed more than he did. I am no gun expert, but it looked like an M60. Behind Emerald Eyes was a scene I'd missed on my way to the roof. The wall to the outside had been completely blasted away, revealing an unobstructed view of what looked like a city square—probably a beautiful sight before the air raids began. Now there wasn't a structure left that was salvageable, just looming orphaned walls and mountains of the same sand-colored rocks that used to make up the buildings. At one point a jihadi appeared seemingly out of nowhere, strolling through the wasteland like it was just another day at the office.

After the water carrier once again set me up in a safe corner, he and the Big Man stepped back while Emerald Eyes took up his position and got ready to fire. It was dead silent. He placed his back to the wall next to a hole they'd made, and then picked up the massive gun, rested it across the opening, and swiftly squeezed the trigger. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!* The sound was ten times more deafening than an AK, but being that one hand was holding my camera and the other the button to shoot, my ears were left bare while everyone else covered theirs. Emerald Eyes was jerking all over from the kickback, but he held on and showed no fear, knowing that the bullets could be returned any second. He fired off two bursts like this, and then we fell back without any response from the regime. By now my leg had completely stopped shaking.

Not too long after we got back to the hot stove, the Big Man and Emerald Eyes advised me that it probably wasn't safe to stay after how they'd just antagonized the enemy, and said I should go. I didn't want to leave yet, but when two straight-up suicidal killers tell me a place is not safe, I listen.

I made my way back to headquarters a few blocks away to spend the night, escorted by the water carrier. After looking at my work and taking into account how long I had been in Syria, the places I had been, and the fact that I had received not one scratch the entire time, I figured it was best to head home to see what I could do with the photos I had while they were still relevant. I was a lightweight and I knew it—no training, no big media organization backing me up, and no connections except the ones I'd made myself. I was relying solely on my instincts to keep me alive and learn the job, and now those instincts were telling me to get the hell out of there. The next day, the sheikh my fixer had introduced me to arranged a ride back to Turkey with a cab driver I had met several times before. His name was Abu Mohammad and I was a fucking idiot for getting into his car, but I figured after eighteen days of persistently not getting shot, what could go wrong on my way home?

I'd finished my last cigarette by the time the driver came back out to the car, and as the cab cruised down the road outside Aleppo on the way to the border, I tapped at my phone to bring up some tunes. I looked up to see us passing the main entrance of the infantry school in al-Muslimiya, which the FSA had taken from the regime shortly before I arrived in country. Suddenly a silver Jeep Cherokee cut across from the oncoming lane, forcing the cab to stop short.

“Whoa!” I yelled. I was grinning, thinking we had just averted a serious accident. Then three men jumped out of the Jeep now blocking the road, and my smile disappeared. The one who’d been in the front passenger seat was dressed in a black tunic with a black scarf wrapped around his face and an AK-47 in his hands. One of the two who’d emerged from the back seat was middle-aged, wearing jeans, a sweater, and a big smile. He gripped a heavy-looking chrome pistol, what I think was a .45. I never got a clear look at the third guy because I was too focused on the man in black, who headed right toward me. Although all three were armed to the teeth, none pointed their weapons at us. After the man in black opened the door of the taxi, he grabbed the driver’s AK, which was propped between my legs, put it under his arm, and then pulled me out softly. He led me over to the Jeep and put me in the back seat. I didn’t say a word, just got in. He climbed in behind me as the cargo door opened and a cuffed Abu Mohammad was thrown in the back. When I slid over to make room, the man in black grabbed me by the shoulder and guided me back to the middle of the seat. I looked deep into his soul through the slit in his scarf, and he stared back with hatred in his eyes, sweat beading around his brows even though it was a cold winter day. Then he pulled the ski cap I was wearing down over my eyes, leaned me forward, and pressed the barrel of the rifle flush against my temple.

The whole encounter probably took less than a minute. A second later we started moving and Abu Mohammad shouted something in Arabic, and one of the jihadis yelled something right back, louder. I don’t know what he said, but it shut Abu Mohammad up real quick. A few minutes later they pulled over and took him out. That was the last time I ever saw him.

THE HOSPITAL

By the time we reached our destination about fifteen minutes later, my back was really starting to hurt from being hunched over for so long. From what I could see out of the bottom of my cap when I was taken from the Jeep, a crowd of people had assembled as if they were expecting me, many of them children, judging by the size of their feet. Two men, one on each side, led me into a building and down a staircase. When we reached the bottom, we made our way along a hallway to a door where one of the men said something in Arabic and pointed to my sneakers; they seemed to know I could see a little from under my makeshift blindfold. I took off my shoes and was marched inside and placed in a chair in front of a desk. There were several people in the room. One of them walked over with my iPhone, lifted my cap slightly, and made me punch in the password and write it on a piece of paper.

I had a feeling I'd been taken by Jabhat al-Nusra, more commonly known in the West as the al-Nusra Front, but I wasn't sure, being that there were so many gangs and crooked FSA militias littered throughout the country, so to try to get an idea of who had me, I threw out a question that I knew would yield a clue:

"Anyone got a cigarette?"

"No, there is no smoking."

This was the first sign that I was with fanatics, being that they consider smoking a sin while 99 percent of the FSA smokes like chimneys.

"Would you like some tea?" a man asked.

"Some tea?" I said, confused.

"Yes."

"Yeah, sure."

A few seconds later a small glass, filled to the brim, was placed in my hand.

"Be very careful," the man said. "It's hot."

As I sat there sipping the tea, I decided I needed to keep myself from panicking and use whatever time I had wisely, to come up with a strategy. The conclusion I came to was that I had to make these guys like me, because people don't usually torture those they like. But how does an American make Islamic

extremists like him? Well, the next conclusion I came to was that I had to make them laugh.

Almost as soon as I'd formulated this approach, a man sat beside me and lifted my cap. I shut my eyes tight so he wouldn't think I'd been peeking, but after a few moments I realized he wanted me to look, and I slowly opened them again. Sitting before me was a commanding figure in his early thirties, maybe a couple of years younger than me. He had a long thin beard and would later introduce himself as General Mohammad. He smiled at me, but it wasn't a smile that said *Welcome!*—it was more of a grin that said *I gotcha!* He covered my eyes again. I could tell that he was someone important, and sensing that he was approachable I decided to engage him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Are you going to kill me?”

A few seconds passed. “*Nahhhh,*” he said.

A moment of silence, and then—

“Woo-hoo! Happy New Year!” I yelled, one fist raised triumphantly over my head. I let out a slight laugh to show that I wasn't scared and gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder. “You guys really had me worried there for a second!”

I'd tilted my head back when I yelled so I could gauge his reaction from under my cap and it was definitely a positive one: jumping back, raising his brow, and laughing. This unexpected display by their new prisoner caught the attention of everyone present, and the two jihadis on the other side of the room asked him impatiently to translate. He did so, and they started to laugh as well.

Good job, Matt, I thought, you broke the ice! Keep it goin'! Keep it goin'!

“What is your name?” asked General Mohammad enthusiastically.

“Matthew,” I said.

I had stopped saying Matt a while ago because it means “dead” in Arabic.

“No, now you are *Jumu'ah*. Forget Matthew. ‘Jumu'ah’ means Friday, a holiday. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, sure, who doesn't love Friday? Listen, what's going on here? Why did you guys take me? I mean, I'm on your side! I hate the regime.”

“My English no that good, *Jumu'ah*, but wait—Wait.”

A few seconds later a translator appeared to clear that problem right up and begin my interrogation. His name was Abdullah and his English was immaculate.

“How are you?” he asked after he sat down in a chair across from me.

“I’ve been better,” I said.

“Keep your head down.”

“Sorry.”

“Now I am going to ask you some questions. You answer them very honestly or else you will be very sorry, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you, and what are you doing in Syria?”

“My name is Matthew Schrier and I’m a freelance photographer. I was invited here.”

“By who?”

“By my friend Ahmed, who’s a Syrian refugee in Kilis, and my friend Majed, in Hraytan.”

“I see. Do you speak Arabic?”

“No, just a few words and phrases.”

“Like what?”

“Uh, *ana isme Matthew. Ana moswer. Ana Ameriki. Ana osla.*”

The last sentence made everyone laugh. I’d said, “*My name is Matthew. I’m a photographer. I’m American. I’m bald.*”

“What is your background?”

“My background?”

“Yes, your background.”

“Well, I’m thirty-four years old and I was born and raised in New York—”

“No, that is not what I am asking. What is your religion? What are your parents?”

“I’m a Christian and my great-grandparents were all German.”

An older jihadi seemed to like this answer and reached over to give me a pat on the back.

“Ah, German!” he said.

Like being German is something to be so proud of, I thought. I’d figured my captors would love that answer, for obvious reasons. Actually I am of mostly Russian descent—and 100 percent Jewish, a detail that if discovered I knew would probably lead to me being decapitated online, Daniel Pearl–style, for all the world to see.

“Look, what do you guys want from me, man?” I said impatiently. “I didn’t

do anything to you and I'm not worth shit."

"Don't curse. We have information that there are CIA agents in the area," replied Abdullah.

"CIA? You think I'm CIA? Look at me, my socks don't even match," I said, laughing. "Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"*Please don't use foul language,*" said Abdullah, firmly.

"Sorry, it's just the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Well, we have to investigate you. We have to know who you are."

"Well, then bring me my phone and I'll give you the numbers of all my friends in Syria and Turkey, and bring me my cameras and let me show you my photos. I was in Karm al-Jabal and outside Air Force Intelligence. The fuckin' regime almost blew me away for those pictures."

"Don't curse!"

"Sorry, sorry," I said, as sincerely as possible.

This obsession with cursing was a second sign that I was with fanatics. They hate profanity and consider it *haram*—a sin.

"So if everything I say checks out, are you gonna let me go?" I asked.

"Yes, if you are telling the truth we will let you go."

"All right."

For the next ten minutes or so I answered questions about who I knew, where I had been, and where my funding came from. He didn't seem all that surprised when I told him I'd funded the trip myself with my savings. Toward the end of the conversation, Abdullah told me to raise my head and I did.

"Now, take the cap from your eyes," he said.

"No, I'm cool, man. I don't have to see your faces."

"I wasn't asking."

"Look, I don't wanna see you guys. Just make your calls, do your investigation, and then let me go. That's the deal, right?"

Mohammad reached over and lifted the cap for me, but my eyes remained closed. After a second I slowly opened them and got my first look at Abdullah. I was shocked. He was young and very good-looking, with pale skin; he had dark, wavy hair, and a neatly shaped goatee. I was expecting a Salafi, one of those ugly bearded maniacs.

"Do you know who Jabhat al-Nusra are?" he asked me.

And that was the third sign that I was with not only fanatics, but *the* fanatics

—al-Qaeda in Syria.

“Yes,” I said.

“Who are they?”

“They are the fiercest warriors in this war and the reason the opposition has been able to take on the regime so successfully. They are always at the front of the most dangerous battles and have no fear of death. I know that my government has labeled them a terrorist organization *even though they have never committed one terrorist act* or—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Abdullah said, smelling the bullshit on my breath. “We are going to search you now and put you in your room.”

“But what about my pictures? They’ll prove everything I just said to you. Let me show them to you, come on, please?”

“In time.”

I remember sitting there for a little while longer, waiting, while my captors put on a surreal kind of show-and-tell. I saw my first suicide belt: This little nerdy guy walked over wearing one and displayed it for me. It was pin-striped—talk about going out in style. Then Mohammad showed me this giant gun, one I think I had seen in some SWAT scene in a movie once.

“American! American!” he said proudly, wearing a huge smile.

“It’s very nice,” I said, not sure how to respond to this.

Two kids, teenagers, came in and started cleaning out my pockets. They took my passport and wallet with my credit cards in it. One of them was wearing green scrubs, which was the first detail suggesting the building I was in might once have been a hospital. After my pockets were emptied, my eyes were covered again and I was led out, where I was allowed to put my sneakers back on and taken down the hallway and into another room. Abdullah, Mohammad, and a third jihadi called Sheikh Ali followed me in, and Abdullah gave me permission to uncover my eyes. The room was fairly large, and empty except for two wool blankets on the tile floor and a two-liter Pepsi bottle filled with water.

“Whenever you hear the door opening you will stand and put your face to the wall, understand?”

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Goodbye, Jumu’ah,” said Mohammad as they left. The door shut and locked behind them.

“What the fuck have you gotten yourself into now, Matthew?” I said, looking around. “You might be here for a long time.”

The cell was about twenty-two feet long and twelve feet wide. It had light-pink walls with markings all over them from previous prisoners. None of the writing scratched into the paint was in English, which led me to conclude I was the first of my kind to stay there. The ceilings were raised, about fifteen feet high, and there was one window too far up to see out of, which had nevertheless been blocked with a wooden door propped against it from the outside. It was dim—and there was nothing I could do about that, because the light switch had been ripped out, and all the wires except one along with it.

I walked over to the blankets, took off my black Jordans, and sat down. The water in the Pepsi bottle was ice-cold, but that was it for hospitality. The floor looked like it hadn't been cleaned since peacetime. Within a few seconds I was back in my kicks, pacing back and forth. I was concerned, of course, but not scared: I was sure as shit not in the CIA, and there were people from Kilis to Aleppo to Amman who would vouch for me and the fact that I'd been invited to Syria. I decided to remain calm and not worry for two days, which was more than enough time for the jihadis to check my story. I was pretty sure that if I was there for longer than that, there was no telling when I might be released, if I was released at all.

A few hours had gone by when I heard a key turn in the door and immediately put my forehead to the wall.

"You may turn around," said Abdullah's voice.

Mohammad was by his side.

"How are you, Jumu'ah?" Mohammad asked.

"Never better," I said.

"Do you need anything?"

"Yeah, a cigarette."

"No," said Abdullah.

"Then how about a piss bottle?"

Abdullah translated and Mohammad made a face that said, *Why not?* This tipped me off that he was the one in charge.

"Okay," said Abdullah.

"Thank you. Have you called any of my people yet?"

"In time," Abdullah replied.

"You want another blanket?" asked Mohammad.

"Sure," I said. "You know, you guys are pretty nice. Nothing like what you see in the movies."

Abdullah laughed and translated for Mohammad, whose English was too poor to follow. They left and a few minutes later Mohammad returned with an empty soda bottle for me to piss in—which I later learned was against the rules—and a blue quilt.

After a while the door opened again and someone dropped a piece of bread, a tray of olives, and some *halawa* on the floor. If there was one thing in the world I hated to eat, it was olives, especially these olives, which were everywhere over here. They came drenched in a nasty oily red sauce that tasted like seasoned shit. As for halawa, it's basically diabetes on a dish, a dry pastry made mostly of sugar. I didn't touch it or the olives, just ate the bread.

Once the sun went down I was in complete darkness except for the light that crept in through the bottom of the door. I'd discover that this—the darkness—was a form of torture just as bad as anything physical, and one that could drive a prisoner just as mad. I kept on pacing, even when I could no longer see what was in front of me, trying to keep from bumping into the walls by counting my steps, but I kept veering off course and hitting them anyway. Finally, I sat back down on the blanket, taking a break from the only activity available to me.

A little less than two weeks before I was kidnapped, I had been on the front lines with the FSA at the besieged Air Force Intelligence Directorate, where thousands of regime soldiers were holed up—one of the most sought-after strongholds left in Aleppo. I spent two and a half days with the men of the Modar Group, a militia. The grunts dug my style, from my clothes to my jokes, and we formed a strong bond. At one point, expecting a night raid, they pulled at least three men off a front line that was already short of bodies just to guard the house where I was staying. For the two and a half days I was with them, we laughed and laughed even while the shells were falling outside our walls. Not one of the men spoke more than a few words of English. But that was one of the things that made me good at what I did: my talent for communicating with people who didn't understand a word I was saying—mostly through humor. One of our favorite topics was politics.

“Bashar?” I would ask.

“Fuck Bashar!” the men would all respond, with vigorous thumbs down.

I'd taught them “fuck” on my first day. By day two, rebels I had never met were saying “Fuck Bashar!” all the way down the line. They taught me some Arabic words too, like donkey (*khar*), which is a huge insult in the region.

“Mohamed Morsi?” I asked.

“Good Morsi, good!” they’d say, thumbs up.

“How about Barack Obama?”

“Good Obama!” they yelled.

Apparently they all thought he was a Muslim.

“Saddam?”

“Fuck you, Saddam!”

“Yeah! George Bush?”

“Fuck Bush!”

And so on. On my last day there I went down to the front, a five-minute walk from where we all slept, to say goodbye to everyone on duty. This was when I made a very big and very unprofessional mistake and let one of the men convince me to shoot a video, something they had been unsuccessfully begging me to do since I got there. The subject I chose to discuss with them was, of course, our usual: politics. I figured this would show my friends back home that these guys weren’t all a bunch of Koran-clutching maniacs; some actually had really great senses of humor. This time, while shooting the video, I spontaneously threw in a name I hadn’t used before.

“America?”

“Yes, good America,” said a rebel named Ahmad, giving the camera a thumbs-up—with the Palestinian flag wrapped around his head and an RPG in the background.

“Bashar?”

“Bashar, fuck you, Bashar!”

“Osama bin Laden?”

“Fuck you!” Ahmad said emphatically, thumbs down.

It was a truly hilarious display of Middle East meets West . . . except to the members of Jabhat al-Nusra, when they saw it. They did not think it was funny at all.

I was wide awake when the door opened and a lone silhouette ordered me out of the room. I pulled my cap down covering my eyes like I had when they’d taken me to the bathroom earlier, and was led down the hall into a room. As soon as I stepped inside I knew why I was there.

“Osama bin Laden?” I heard my own voice say, laughing.

“Fuck you!” replied Ahmad in the video.

I stopped dead in my tracks and closed my eyes.

“Oh shit,” I whispered to myself.

A second later I was seated next to Mohammad behind the desk in the same room where I had been interrogated. He raised my cap from my eyes and I saw that it was just us and his friend Sheikh Ali. They had uploaded all my photos and videos onto a laptop. Sheikh Ali was pudgy and of average height, with a thin mustache. By now the video was over—it being only about a minute long—so he pressed play again. When Ahmad dropped the F-bomb on Osama bin Laden again, I slowly turned my head toward Mohammad with a *Whoops* expression pasted on my face. He stared back at me with an enormous smile.

“You’re in *big* trouble,” he said, and pressed play again.

“Oh, come on, man! Fuck Bashar? Fuck Bush? Those are the people I’m really making fun of here. Bin Laden’s just a name I threw in! I’m sorry.”

“You see him!” yelled Sheikh Ali, pointing to Ahmad in the video. “Donkey!”

“*Khar*,” I agreed, nodding.

“Yes, *khar*!” he yelled, picking up an AK-47. “Fuck Osama bin Laden? We’re Jabhat al-Nusra!”

I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to know for certain who had me, but now the cat was out of the bag, which couldn’t be good. It just figured that this stupid fucking video was the thing that made one of them slip.

“Oh, come on, man, you’re really gonna shoot me over this?” I said. “I’m on your side. I came here to photograph guys like you killing Bashar. I love the Syrian people. Mohammad, hand me my phone, please?” I pointed to my iPhone, which was lying on the desk next to the laptop. “Come on, I can prove it to you.”

Mohammad, who was playing the video over and over again, handed me my phone. I opened it up and found the folder with the photographs of refugees I had taken on my first trip to Syria the month before. I passed the phone back and was shocked by their response. I expected them to be moved by the suffering of their own people; instead they laughed as they flipped through the photos, making fun of the elderly and sobbing women.

“How can you laugh at that?” I said in a disappointed tone. “That woman’s son was killed. That’s why she’s crying.”

Sheikh Ali said something in Arabic and he and Mohammad laughed some

more, proving Joyce right: “’Tis the loud laugh bespeaks the vacant mind.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be fighting for these people?” I asked.

“You—You!” yelled Mohammad enthusiastically, pointing to the phone and holding it out to me.

“What? You want to see pictures of me?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“All right,” I said and opened another folder for them to look through.

I couldn’t believe it had worked. Breaking out my photos had made them completely forget about the video. As they scrolled through them, they saw me with people from all over the world: Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and finally . . . Rio during Carnival. I hadn’t remembered these, and will never forget the looks on the faces of my two militant jihadist captors when I popped up on the small screen, shirtless, tattoo visible on my abdomen, with five muscular transvestites in blonde wigs and cheetah-print miniskirts draped all over me, some holding beers, some puckering their lips for a kiss. There was a long, uncomfortable moment of silence as Mohammad and Sheikh Ali stared at the photo—which encompassed about five major sins—their jaws on the floor. Then the silence was broken: pointing at the picture, Mohammad began laughing hysterically and Sheikh Ali followed his lead. *Is this really fucking happening to me right now?* I thought to myself. That picture was some serious *haram*, but since nobody seemed to care, I just went with it, determined to keep them amused.

“Yeah, yeah, that was in Rio! They were diggin’ my shit, man!” I said, laughing along with them. “Check out the next one! Check out the next one!”

This next photo showed me standing tall, shirtless again and ripped, wearing a pair of joke glasses with a huge penis in place of the nose. They didn’t seem to know what they were looking at, so I tapped the screen and zoomed in for them.

“Check it out, man—It’s a dick!”

As soon as they realized I was wearing a giant penis on my face they lost it all over again, just laughing their asses off. Mohammad even reached out and grabbed my chest to see if I was still as firm as when the photo was taken.

“Yeah, I hit the gym every day. We should work out sometime,” I said, motioning toward the hallway where free weights were set up for the jihadis.

They scrolled through a few more photos and finally came to the last one of me, my head shaved like always, sitting next to a Buddhist monk in Cambodia. Laughing, Mohammad pointed at the monk and yelled, “*Osla!*” knowing “bald”

was one of the few Arabic words I knew.

“Yeah, I told him not to let the haircut fool him; I’m way beyond redemption!” I said, laughing, knowing neither one would understand what I had said.

After about forty-five minutes of this I was taken back to my cell, where I paced for the rest of the night without sleeping. I had averted a serious ass whipping, or worse, thanks to my photographs, sense of humor, and quick thinking, and I had also done something else without even realizing it: I had strengthened my bond with General Mohammad. As I would later learn, if General Mohammad liked you, you were untouchable.

If he didn’t? Well. Then you had a serious problem.

Shortly after the darkness ended, the screaming began. It was coming from down the hall, in what I’d learn was the boiler room.

“*Allah Akbar!*” the victim cried out, and between his screams:

Whack! Whack! Whack!

I would come to know the sound well—they were whipping the bottoms of his feet with a thick cable. This went on for about fifteen minutes, and then stopped as suddenly as it began. A few hours later it started up again, with someone else. This guy didn’t scream *Allah Akbar* like the first one. He just screamed.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

I paced faster, holding my hands to my ears to muffle the sound.

“Jesus Christ, where the fuck am I?” I muttered to myself, over and over again.

The screaming continued, on and off, all day. I paced; I sat; I stood there awaiting my turn, but it never came.

All night long I heard intense fighting between the regime and the opposition just down the block; the machine-gun fire and shelling were constant. Outside my door, rebels marched by in large groups; they congregated in a room not far from mine. Sometimes they would all scream “*Allah Akbar!*” at the same time, something that always gave me an unsettling feeling.

That night the electricity went out, which was common in Aleppo, and shortly after it did, two or three men came to look at me. One of them spoke perfect English; I called him the Ghost Man because I never saw his face. They

busted in with flashlights when I was lying down—there wasn't time to stand so I scrambled up and leaned my face against the wall while on my knees. As the others searched the room, the Ghost Man walked over to me and shined his flashlight right in my face.

“Can you see me?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Are you lying?”

“No.”

“Good. Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

A few minutes after he and the others left, one of the guards brought me a piece of bread and a small Styrofoam container filled with cold rice. With no utensils I ate like an Arab, ripping off pieces of the bread and using them to scoop up the rice. It was too dark to see my hands, and I dropped more rice on the floor than I got in my mouth. The next day, when it was light again, I noticed that the Ghost Man and his friends had ripped out the one remaining wire where the light switch used to be. Life was definitely not getting any easier.

I had no real contact with anyone except the guards, who fed me and took me to the bathroom. If it weren't for these bathroom breaks I never would have left the cell. The guards were mostly young, in their late teens or early twenties. Two or three times a day, one would appear and say *hamam*—bathroom—and I would lift my head from the wall, cover my eyes with my cap, grab my piss bottle, and walk to the door. The guard would seize me by my arm and lead me down the hallway. I always kept my eyes open, looking out the bottom of my cap where I could see everyone I passed from the knees down. They parted before me and I could feel their stares as I walked by. I was glad I didn't have to look any of them in the eyes.

The bathroom was big and had two rooms. The first was for washing up before prayer time, and held a trough with three faucets and two sinks adjacent to it. The room beyond this had three stalls; I could not lift my cap until I had entered one of them. The stalls were always very clean, and inside each was a squat toilet and a hose connected to a faucet on the wall. I'd hardly ever used one of these, though I was familiar with them. In that part of the world they don't usually use toilet paper, just the hose and their fingers. I remember having to overcome a deep sense of repugnance to adapt to this, and before I was

kidnapped I would wait to relieve myself until I got back from the field to the apartment where I was staying in Hraytan, which had a regular toilet. After my first bowel movement as a prisoner, I came out with my eyes covered and headed over to the sink to wash my hands. There was no soap.

“Can I have some soap, please?” I asked.

The kid didn’t understand, so I rubbed my hands together as if lathering up and asked again.

“*La*,” he answered stiffly.

This meant no.

“Oh, come on,” I said, pleading. “How can you not give me soap after I just cleaned out my asshole with my fingers? Please?”

“*La!*” he repeated.

“Man, this is disgusting,” I said, as I rinsed off as well as I could.

Back in my cell I stared at my fingers through the darkness. As hungry as I was, I dreaded my next meal, knowing I was going to have to eat it with those hands.

By my third day the solitude was really starting to get to me. My two-day deadline had passed, and I was pretty sure no one had contacted my friends in Syria like they’d said they would. At one point the door opened and someone entered, alone. All I could see out of the corner of my eye was a pair of camouflage pants and boots.

“How are you, Jumu’ah?” It was Mohammad.

“I’m going crazy, man,” I said, defeated. “Just please stay here for a minute and talk to me. Just talk to me.”

He stepped closer to where I stood, my forehead still pressed against the wall, and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Jumu’ah, my English no that good,” he said. “It okay. It okay.”

He gave my shoulder a friendly pat and then left. A few minutes later, the door that was covering the window from the outside slid over about ten inches to let some light into the room. When I jumped up on the pipes and looked outside, what I saw was quite the sight. A few hundred yards away was a huge building shaped like a zigzag. It had clearly been the scene of an epic battle, and was shot all to hell with not a single window left intact. Judging by the real estate they controlled, the *katiba*—militia group—within al-Nusra that had me was clearly a major power.

My new view and this act of kindness from Mohammad made me feel a little better. It suddenly dawned on me why I hadn't been tortured, abused, or so much as insulted since my arrival—it was because Mohammad said so.

Still convinced that these people were ultimately going to let me go, I tried to find some kind of clue that I could give my government once I was home, to help them find where I'd been kept. The first thing I thought of was a serial number from something in the room, like a pipe, and a split second after this notion entered my mind I looked up to my right at the window and saw a manufacturer's sticker pasted in the center. The window's pristine condition combined with the fact that every single window in the building across from mine had been shot out suggested that it had recently been replaced, so I hoisted myself into a pull-up on a pipe to get closer to eye level with the sticker and read what was printed on it.

My memory isn't quite photographic, but it's better than most, so after I made a rhyme with the numbers they were locked in my head for good. Now if I made it home, the FBI would be able to hack into the company's system to find out where the window was delivered and who it was shipped to. Most importantly, they'd find out who had paid for it and was funding the terrorists who'd kidnapped me.

By day four my mind was racing to come up with ways to negotiate with these people who I seemed to see less and less of. I had about twenty-five grand in the bank, so I figured I'd offer them ten. For the first time since I'd arrived, I knocked on the door. Within a minute, one of the guards opened it and asked me in Arabic what I wanted.

“Get me the guy that speaks *inglisi*,” I said confidently. “I want to talk money. You understand what I mean? Money.”

I held out my hand and rubbed my fingers together while repeating the word. He shut the door. Less than five minutes later the Ghost Man appeared, with someone new. With my head against the wall, I couldn't see his face, just that he was small and wearing a judge's robe that hung open. This wardrobe choice earned him the nickname the Little Judge.

“What do you want?” the Ghost Man asked.

“I wanna talk money. I'll give you ten grand cash if you let me go,” I said. “I can call my people in Turkey and have it waiting for you when we get there.”

“Ten thousand dollars?” said the Ghost Man, stunned, as if I had just offered him a million.

“Yeah, ten thousand cash. We just jump the border, meet my friends, and then boom—you get your money and I get to go home to my family.”

He translated to the Little Judge, which meant he was definitely someone with influence within the organization. The Ghost Man did this in a whisper, as if they were still unsure if I could understand Arabic.

“I will talk to my brothers about it,” said the Ghost Man. “Wait here.” The two men left, locking the door behind them.

They never came back.

By the next day, my hope that we could come to some kind of an arrangement had completely faded. Making my mood even worse was the fact that it had been about a week since the last time I’d sent out emails letting my friends and family know I was alive, and uploaded some photos to my website. If they didn’t hear from me again soon, they’d know something had gone wrong and be worried beyond comprehension.

While I paced, I started thinking about why the hell nobody had come to see me apart from my brief visits from the Ghost Man and the Little Judge the day before and Mohammad the day before that. I came to the conclusion that they were testing me to see if I had training for this kind of situation. I figured that if I continued to keep my cool they would only be more convinced that I was a CIA agent, so I decided to take a chance and just embrace all the emotions swirling through my head, and lose it.

“Fuck it,” I said and started pounding on the door. “Come on,” I yelled. “Let me out! I didn’t do anything! I’m just a photographer! I told you, I’ll give you ten thousand dollars!”

This went on for a good half hour before a guard finally opened the door, and it was at that moment that I seriously fucking regretted everything I had just done.

“*Yala!*” the guard said.

“No, you know what? I changed my mind,” I said, facing the wall. “I don’t wanna talk to anyone anymore.”

“*Yala!*” he demanded again.

He stepped over to me, pulled my hat down, and led me into the hallway by

my arm. This is when I really started to bug out—and I was no longer acting.

“Wait, wait, where are you taking me?”

I thought they were going to torture me. I stopped short, and that’s when the Ghost Man came up beside me, put his arm around my shoulders, and cradled me like a beloved son.

“Don’t worry,” he said consolingly. “In a few days they will come and take you.”

“*What?* Take me where? What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything!”

“Shh—shh,” he said as a guard took me by the hand and led me to a door on the other side of the hall.

“No, no, wait! Wait!” I cried out. Then the guard lifted my cap and I saw it was only the office.

A second later Mohammad and Sheikh Ali came up behind me and led me inside after lifting my legs and removing my shoes for me. They were being especially cordial, compassionate, and sympathetic to my state of mind, which was really confusing me. I felt like my world was spinning out of control.

In the office there was a lounge area over by a hot stove, and they sat me down on one of the mattresses in front of it. Both seemed amused by my spectacle. Mohammad put a glass in front of me and filled it to the brim with hot tea. Then he did the same for Sheikh Ali and himself. On the other side of the room a TV was broadcasting Syrian news.

“Come on, man, what is going on here?” I said pathetically. “You guys really don’t want to make ten grand for some loser who didn’t cost you a dime?”

“Ten thousand dollars?” said Sheikh Ali. “No.”

“Then how much do you want?”

“We want *one hundred million dollars*,” he said. They both laughed.

I countered with fifteen grand, but they didn’t bite and kept the price firm at one hundred million.

“Come on, man, I’m trying to be serious here. I’m not worth anything. My parents don’t have any money and I don’t work for anyone.”

Sheikh Ali shook his head and repeated his price. Mohammad took the pistol from his shoulder holster, removed the clip, and handed it to me, like he was giving a child a toy to play with.

“Oh, cool,” I said. “Is this a Glock?”

“Yes, American,” said Mohammad.

“Nice, is this the safety?” I asked, fumbling with the gun to prove I had no

experience with weapons. Then I raised it and pointed it at the wall wearing a badass expression.

“*Hasta la vista, baby!*” I said, squeezing the trigger. Sheikh Ali and Mohammad both laughed, although I’m pretty sure neither of them knew where the line came from.

Abdullah joined us, along with another man of about twenty, with dark skin, a long face, and glasses. As soon as they entered I handed the gun back to Mohammad and took another sip of my tea. Mohammad kept refilling my glass as soon as it was half empty.

Abdullah’s hair was damp and he had water all over his face. After he sat down, Mohammad handed him a tissue and he wiped his face dry. He was in a good mood, and seemed a lot more relaxed than he had been during our previous encounters. The other man, Yassine, I hadn’t met before. He stayed in the background, walking around the room, listening and observing.

“How are you?” Abdullah asked me.

“I miss my family,” I lied. “What’s going on with the investigation? You guys have had me for like five days now. I mean, where *am* I?”

“You’re in an Islamic court,” he answered.

This caught me completely off guard.

“What? But why?”

“You know why, and tomorrow you will be judged.”

“Judged for what, man, being an American? What are the charges? I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to kill you,” he said calmly.

“Then what are you gonna do with me?” I asked.

“That’s up to the judge.”

“Well, where am I gonna be judged?”

“In here.”

“In here? This room?”

“Yes, the judge will come here.”

“And what about evidence? How can I prove my innocence if you won’t let me use my photos and contact witnesses?”

He just smiled and waved off my questions. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. With all the men I’d heard marching by my room and screaming “*Allah Akbar*,” I’d been almost positive I was on some kind of jihadi base.

“I have a proposition for you,” Abdullah said, abruptly changing the subject.

“All right.”

“We want you to call your embassy and ask for three million dollars, and we will give you five percent.”

I sat there in shock as the three of them looked at me, patiently waiting for an answer.

“What are you, crazy?” I said with a laugh. “That’s never gonna happen! My government doesn’t negotiate with—”

I stopped and looked at them. They just waited for me to go on. None of them seemed to realize that I’d been about to call them terrorists.

“. . . with people who do things like this.” I finished. “But if you think it’s possible, yeah sure, I’ll do it. Where’s the phone? You got the number?”

But now Abdullah had a different proposal for me.

“How would you feel about helping us get things across the border?” he asked.

“What do you mean? Like a smuggler?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what are you gonna pay me? If I take a risk like that I expect to be well compensated. I’m not fuckin’ stupid,” I said firmly, trying to give the impression that any of this was possible.

“Don’t curse.”

“Sorry, I come from a broken home.”

“And America,” he said.

“That’s true,” I agreed with a smile, and we both had a laugh.

“You will be well paid.”

“But why me? I’m sure you have no shortage of people willing to do this for you.”

“Yes, but none of them look like you.”

“And how do I look?”

“Well, you’re white, for one thing.”

“So are you,” I said, holding up my palms.

“I mean you’re not an Arab, and you’re an American,” he said firmly.

For the next few minutes we discussed this ridiculous scenario as if I wouldn’t make a run for it as soon as they let me go.

“Okay, well, we’re going to put you back in your room now, because as you

can see, me and my brothers are very busy.”

“Doing what? Come on, man, don’t put me back in there. I’m goin’ crazy in there. Can’t I just sit over there and watch TV? I won’t try to run away, I swear.”

“No,” he said, with a smile on his face. “Come on.”

As I stood up and covered my eyes again I pleaded with them not to take me back, but it didn’t work. As soon as they locked the door behind me I started banging on it harder than ever, screaming out the same things as before. This time it only took about ten minutes for them to come and get me, only now it wasn’t for tea and business propositions. Instead, they led me down the hall and into the bathroom, where Abdullah was standing in camouflage, holding his AK-47.

“What the fuck, man? This is bullshit!” I yelled, hysterical.

“Don’t curse!”

“But what do you *want* from me? I’m not a CIA agent and you know it!”

“I don’t know anything!”

“Well, use your instincts!”

“No! I believe in your country you have a saying, ‘innocent until proven guilty,’ right? Well, here you are guilty until proven innocent.” Abdullah was angry now, his voice rising. “We do not know who you are! For years, men like you have been coming here,” he screamed, “killing our men and raping our women!”

“Americans rape your women? You’re crazy!” I said, grabbing both sides of my head. “You know what? Just do it! Fuckin’ shoot me! Do it and get it over with!” I started banging my head against the wall to prove I wasn’t afraid of pain or death, just like them. In reality it was mostly for show because I kept my hands to my head, my fingers between the ceramic tiles and my skull.

“Don’t curse! I am not going to tell you again!” Abdullah said furiously. “And stop doing that! Now we are going to put you back in your room—”

“No, come on, it’s gonna be dark soon and I can’t take the darkness anymore!”

“Then I will give you a candle!”

“Well, what about a shower? I stink.”

“As you can see, the electricity is out—” Actually I hadn’t noticed, still being blindfolded. “So if you want to bathe you will have to do so in the cold.”

“But it’s freezing in here; I’ll get sick.”

“Then don’t take one! Now we are going to put you in your room and you

will be silent or we will silence you! Do you understand?”

That shut me up. I could tell I had really pissed him off.

“Yes.”

“Now take off your shoes,” he said, calming down.

I did, and as soon as they were off, someone dropped a pair of brand-new black rubber slippers on the floor. I assumed that they were for me to wear inside my room so that my sneakers could remain outside as custom demanded.

“Thank you,” I said, putting on the slippers.

I was returned to my room—again. As soon as the door closed and the key turned, I took a seat on the blanket. I remember thinking there was no way they could peg me for a secret agent now, not after that pathetic display. A minute later the door opened and someone threw something inside, where it rolled across the floor. It was a candle.

Just before the darkness set in, a guard opened the door to drop my dinner and give me a light for the candle. I stared at the dancing flame as if it were a ballet and dreaded the time when it would burn out. A few hours later the door opened again, and I placed my head against the wall. Someone tapped me on the shoulder to turn around and I did. It was one of the guards, wearing a red-and-white-checkered scarf around his face, and a tunic. He pointed to my blankets and said something in Arabic.

“You want me to pick them up?” I asked.

He nodded. That’s when I realized he was wearing my sneakers.

“Hey, are those my Jordans?”

He didn’t understand, so I pointed to his feet.

“My Jordans—you’re wearing my Jordans.”

He finally did the math and nodded. I could tell he was smiling, too.

“I can’t believe this,” I said as I picked up my blankets. “You guys are stealing my sneakers now.”

The sneaker thief instructed me to cover my eyes and follow him down the hallway. We passed a few rooms like mine and then came to a set of black double doors, made of steel and secured with a padlock. He took off the lock, opened one of the doors, and I entered a dark cell. The door closed and locked again behind me.

The stench hit me right away; I immediately knew that I was not alone. As my eyes adjusted I saw figures all along the walls, sitting up from sleeping

positions. My instincts told me that I was with POWs from the regime. Although I could not see their eyes, I felt them all staring at me. After a moment I placed my blankets on the ground next to one of the men and he jumped to his feet.

“*La,*” he said and led me over to a vacant area, next to which an isolated prisoner slept under his blankets.

I shrugged it off and set up my bed where he’d shown me. After I sat down, I looked around again. I could still feel the stares of everyone in the room, which was significantly larger than my old one. Seeing that nobody was going to welcome me to the neighborhood, I decided I’d have to be the one to break the silence.

“*Assallam alekum,*” I said. “Any of you guys speak English?”

Whispers in Arabic broke out all over, and then a single voice pierced through them.

“We’re not allowed to talk to you,” it said. “If we speak to you we will be punished.”

“Says who?” I asked.

“They came in about an hour ago and told us you would be joining us.”

“Oh, okay.”

That seemed to be the end of that conversation, so I lay down and closed my eyes.

About an hour later the electricity came back on and the room lit up. I felt incredible relief to know I would no longer be condemned to continuous darkness after sunset, at least as long as the power was running in this part of the city. Once again the men all sat up on their blankets. Everything about them, from their ragged and mismatched clothing to the slow way in which they moved, made them resemble zombies from a living-dead movie. They all had long beards and green smocks on over their rags. In the center of the room were two beat-up pairs of matching combat boots, further confirming my theory that I was with POWs. To break the uncomfortable silence that had descended again, I stood and headed over to the closest man (except for my neighbor, who was still sleeping).

“*Assallam alekum,*” I said, holding out my hand. “Matthew.”

I moved on, from man to man, from one side of the room to the other, doing the same. Everyone shook my hand without hesitation.

“Muslim?” asked one man (whose name I would later learn was Rias) as our hands locked.

“No, Christian,” I said, making the sign of the cross.

By the time I was done I had made my way back to my bed. The lone man they had placed me next to was still under his covers.

“So what? Is this where you stick the crazy people?” I asked the room at large, motioning toward the lump under the blankets.

I saw one of the POWs smile and realized he understood me—he was the man who had spoken after I arrived.

“Are you the one who speaks English?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he replied.

I headed over to him. He was young, in his midtwenties, with a very sweet face and light skin.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ali,” he said. “Where are you from?”

“New York.”

“New York!” he exclaimed, shocked. “What are you doing in Syria?”

“I’m a photographer. I came here to cover the war.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m an idiot. Listen, where are we?”

“Aleppo.”

“Is this a hospital?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think it’s a hospital. A kid in scrubs searched me my first day and I saw a hospital bed in the hallway a few days ago when they took me to the bathroom. How long have you been here?”

“For about two weeks.”

“Excuse me,” I heard another prisoner say.

I glanced up and saw a man looking at me from a corner on the other side of the room.

I walked over to him. “What’s your name?”

“Oqba,” he replied, haughtily, “Are you American?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s not good for you, my friend. Jabhat al-Nusra does not like Americans, especially since your government labeled them a terrorist group.”

“So they are Jabhat al-Nusra,” I said, feeling my stomach sink. “I was hoping they were just saying that to try and scare me.”

“No, you are in an Islamic court.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically. “And are the judges fair here?”

“Yes, very fair.”

“Pardon me for having doubts, as the American.”

“Are you Jewish?” he asked.

“Am I Jewish? No, why?”

“I thought that might be why they grabbed you. It happens all the time.”

“Really?”

“Can I ask you for a favor, please?” he said abruptly, changing the subject.

“Yeah, sure, what’s up?”

“Please do not talk to any of the men in the room,” he said seriously. “I am asking you for your safety and for theirs.”

“Okay, but what do you want me to do, just sit there and twiddle my thumbs?”

“I am only asking for your safety and theirs, believe me.”

“Yeah, I heard you, but they’re grown men and if they choose to talk to me that’s their decision. I can’t do anything about that. But I’ll tell you what: How about I just don’t talk to you?”

“That’s all I am asking.”

“Okay, I gotcha,” I said, heading back over to Ali.

After spending the past five days in solitary, speaking to Ali was very steady. He didn’t want the people holding us to know he spoke English, so I promised not to say anything. I was surprised that he didn’t show an ounce of animosity toward me for working with the FSA, his sworn enemy. In fact, he didn’t seem to care one bit, and neither did anyone else. I suspected they were all Alawites, a Shia sect that made up only 10 percent of Syria’s (mostly Sunni) population, but controlled the government from Bashar down. Out of politeness I refrained from asking. Asking someone if they were an Alawite while in a Sunni environment was like asking someone if they were a Jew in Nazi Germany. I had made my first friend and I didn’t want to risk losing him.

Ali and I hadn’t been talking long when we all heard the door being unlocked. I ran back over to my bed and hid dramatically under the covers, causing a slight stir of laughter throughout the room. After the door opened I felt a tap on my shoulder and came out of hiding to see a kid of around twenty standing over me—one of the guards.

“Hi,” he said, waving. He had thick black hair that was long in the back, and

an effeminate manner.

“Hi.”

In Arabic, he asked my name and I told him it was Jumu’ah.

“Abu Hamza,” he said, his hand on his chest.

After introducing himself to me he moved off to bring a bottle of rubbing alcohol, some cotton, and fresh bandages to two men who were wounded. One had a bandaged foot, and the other’s hand was wrapped up after being shot through twice. The soldier with the wounded hand was Shareef, a thirty-year-old captain in the Syrian army, and the officer with the wounded foot was Fadaar, a lieutenant colonel.

Yassine entered the room and stepped over to me. “Is this better?” he asked, motioning to the other men.

“Yes, much. You speak English?”

“A little. I am learning, so speak slowly. Are they being nice to you?”

“Them? Yeah, but none of them speak English so it’s not like they can really be mean.”

“I did not understand,” he said, confused.

“That’s all right. Yes, they’re being nice to me.”

“Okay, I have to go now,” he said. “Bye.” He left again, followed by Abu Hamza, and the door locked behind them.

Shortly after this, the electricity blinked out.

I was amazed at how programmed these men had become. As soon as the lights died, most of them immediately lay down to sleep, except for a group that congregated in the corner around a fading flashlight. None of that group spoke English, so I was on my own. As I lay there, I heard the door being unlocked again and pretended to be asleep so I wouldn’t have to face the wall. A second later someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to see who it was.

Bent over me was a firmly built man, dressed in all black and wearing a ski mask.

“Are you Matt?” he asked in a terrifying whisper.

I lay there, frozen, choosing my words carefully.

“Nuh-uh, my name’s Jumu’ah,” I said.

He turned and left the room. I sat up like a switchblade.

“What the fuck was that, man?” I said. “Did anyone just see that? Anyone?”

Nobody answered me. My gut said the fanatics were just having some fun so I decided not to let it worry me and instead closed my eyes to sleep. I remember lying there before I dozed off, smiling because I was no longer in solitary. I felt no fear among these men; instinctively I knew that as long as I was with them, I would be among friends.

When the lights came back on, everyone who had fallen asleep woke up again. It was still night. I stood, stretched, and watched as every man in the room, almost in sync, took off his shirt and started examining the fabric closely. For a second I was confused, and then it hit me.

“Oh no,” I whispered, full of dread. “Lice!”

I looked over at Oqba.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Are you lookin’ for lice? Do you have lice?”

“They’re everywhere,” he said, matter-of-fact.

“Oh, great!” I muttered, stripping off my vest, hoodie, and tee shirt to examine myself.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Rias pointing at my abdomen; within a second, so was everyone else.

“What is that tattoo of?” Oqba asked.

“It’s a tribal sun.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. It’s a Native American thing.”

Tattoos were *haram*, but the Alawites seemed more curious than anything. In fact, out of the eighteen of them, it turned out that only five even prayed.

“I don’t see anything on my shirt,” I said. “Can someone show me what one of these things looks like?”

Oqba translated what I’d said and Rias called me over. Crawling on his finger was a clear insect with a black dot in the middle.

“What the fuck is that thing?” I said, disgusted. “That’s not lice. It’s too big.”

Crunch! Rias crushed the parasite on the floor and held up his finger for me to see. It was smeared with blood—his blood. They were bedbugs.

After I checked my gear thoroughly and was certain I was free of critters, I started to pull my clothes back on. As I zipped up my vest, a short man with more salt than pepper in his hair walked over to my bed, put on my slippers, and walked off toward the small bathroom at the far end of our cell.

“Excuse me, what do you think you’re doin’?” I asked.

He just kept going, ignoring me, so I looked at Oqba.

“Did he just steal my slippers?”

“He’s the boss,” said Oqba.

“Well, what makes him the boss?”

“He’s the oldest.”

“He’s the *oldest*? That’s how you pick your bosses?” I asked, incredulous.
“What is this, kindergarten?”

I’m not normally a confrontational person, but this being my first time as an outsider in a terrorist prison, I thought it would be a good idea to assert myself sooner rather than later, to prove I wasn’t a punk and avoid any further misunderstandings. “Well, he may be your boss,” I told Oqba, “but he’s not mine, and I’ll be taking my slippers back when he gets done in there.”

“We share everything here,” said Oqba mildly.

As I looked around, I noticed that—aside from the two pairs of boots in the middle—my slippers were the only shoes in the room. This made me feel like kind of a jackass.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Oqba.

“That’s quite all right, my friend,” he said sincerely.

When the Boss came out of the bathroom, he walked directly over to me and took off the slippers, leaving them exactly where he’d found them. I later learned that he wasn’t the boss just because he was the oldest—he was also a colonel, and a tough-ass colonel at that. The man took nine bullets from an AK-47 when he and three other officers were ambushed in a car by the FSA. He was the only one who survived.

Within minutes I found myself over by Oqba, the Boss, and several other prisoners; among them Shareef, the tall and lanky captain with the shot-up hand, and Fadaar, the lieutenant colonel, who was extremely good-looking, with piercing blue eyes and a commanding presence. Oqba’s earlier request that I refrain from talking to him (and everyone else in the room) had been seemingly forgotten. Now he was my way of connecting to the others, and not just as a translator, but as a friend.

As I stood talking with the group, they kept patting the blankets and inviting me to sit with them.

“No way, man, I’m cool here,” I said, flattered but also in no hurry to be infested. “You guys are crawling with bedbugs and I wanna hold them off as

long as possible—no offense.”

This they understood, and Rias offered me a piece of his flatbread. It was about the same length and width as a rolling paper, so after accepting it I rolled it up like a joint, licked the edge, and put it in my mouth, pretending to light it with an invisible match. The men were transfixed by my actions. I took a big imaginary hit and held it in.

“Hashish,” I croaked, as if my lungs were full of smoke, and then I coughed while passing the “doobie” to Rias.

Everyone—especially the Boss—started laughing hysterically as Rias hit the joint. When he passed it back to me I ate it, and he handed me another piece of bread. For the next few hours we talked about cigarettes, beer, and of course, women. I was truly surprised by how open-minded and laid-back the Alawites were.

“Jennifer Lopez,” said Shareef, who spoke a little English.

“Oooh, Jennifer,” I said, drawing a line straight down through the air, ending in a big curve to represent her ass before giving it an imaginary slap.

“Yes!” said Shareef.

All the guys agreed.

“Angelina Jolie,” Shareef said next.

“Oh, Angelina, I love Angie,” I said, puckering my lips.

“Britney Spears!” Shareef cried enthusiastically, pointing at me.

“*Fuuuck* that crack whore!” I bellowed, waving her off like the bum she was.

The laughter that exploded once Oqba translated this was epic. I was honestly surprised they had a translation for that. By the next time the lights went out, I no longer felt like an outsider.

A little while later after the lights came back on, I sat talking to Oqba, just the two of us. He had one rule for our conversations:

“Don’t ask any personal questions of me,” he said seriously.

And this meant anything.

“So, where are you from?” I asked innocently that first evening.

“I told you—*don’t ask me anything personal*,” said Oqba, with a cold stare.

“But you just asked me how many women I’ve fucked!”

(I totally lied when I answered that one, too—fuck him, he wouldn’t even tell me where he was from!)

He’d reacted the same way when I asked if he was married or had kids. At

first I thought it might have been because his family had been killed, but I'd later find out it wasn't. He just didn't want to tell me.

"January seventh, 2013," I whispered to myself, lying on my back in the dark.

I said the date every day, sometimes five times a day, so I wouldn't lose track.

Just an ocean of misery as I lay in the blackness, staring at the feeble light shining through the vents on the doors from whatever light source the jihadis resorted to when the power was out. It was darker here than in my other room, and when the electricity was out it was almost impossible to tell whether it was night or day. There was no window in the cell, except in the bathroom, which stunk so bad you didn't spend any more time in there than you had to. In the background, our soundtrack was the screaming of someone being tortured and a twelve-year-old boy, Abu Jaz, walking around singing the Koran as if nothing were happening.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Jesus Christ, the only difference here was that it was even closer.

I started pacing again in the darkness. I couldn't stop thinking about how my mother was going to feel when she heard her only son had been kidnapped by terrorists. As I thought of this I started working up to my first real cry. Just as a tear was sliding from my eye I heard my name ring out in the darkness.

"Matthew," said Oqba.

"Yeah?"

"Come here, sit down."

I did, and he started speaking to me in a soft, melodic tone.

"Do you like Michael Bolton?"

"Well, I really only know maybe two of his songs," I said, caught off guard.

"I used to love to drive my car and listen to Michael Bolton." He sang a line of some song I had never heard. "Do you know that one?"

"No, I only know, like, 'When a Man Loves a Woman.'"

"You are thinking of your mother right now?" he asked me.

"Yeah—what if they cut my head off and put it on the internet? She'll drop dead and it'll be all because of me."

I started to tear up again and began berating myself for being such a selfish prick—going off to Syria and getting myself kidnapped—but Oqba cut me off.

“Matthew, you are an American. You are strong. You are my brother.” He grabbed me by the hand. “Now, no more of this; not here.”

I was so embarrassed. I felt like such a pussy all of a sudden.

“Yeah, all right, never again,” I said gratefully. “Thank you.”

That was the last time I came close to crying in front of the men. Still, it can be good to cry, as long as nobody sees it. It keeps you human and that keeps you hungry to survive—more and more with each passing day, in a weird way, because what was the point of going through this hell if you were only going to die at the end?

To pass the time I started playing stories from my past over in my head, watching them like movies, going through every scene, over and over again, word for word. Sometimes I would start laughing at all the dumb shit I had thought up over the years and the crazy guy they’d put me next to would start laughing along with me. Poor Crazy Mohammad, man, they’d really fucked him up. His wrists and ankles were so swollen they looked like they were about to burst. Once in a while I would talk to him, even though I knew he didn’t understand a word of what I said, and he would just giggle. One time I asked him what his favorite color was—he didn’t understand the question—and then I just moved on to Angelina Jolie. That he understood. If there was one thing they all understood it was Angelina. Too bad we couldn’t get a big poster of her. We could’ve used it cover up our burrow hole, if only one of us could’ve gotten his hands on a rock hammer.

Around this time I started to examine the moments leading up to my abduction, replaying them like one of my stories. After we left Aleppo, Abu Mohammad drove up the enormous steel arch with “Industrial City” written on it in huge English letters. This was a major checkpoint, the largest I had seen in my travels around the country, with at least thirty rebels manning it. When Abu Mohammad tried to drive through, a rebel knocked on my window and he pulled over. After getting out and having a short conversation, he jumped back in again and turned the taxi around. This was what should have set off alarms in my head, but I just assumed the road beyond the checkpoint had been bombed from the air and we had to find another route. I was wrong—less than ten minutes later I was in the back of the Cherokee with the man in black.

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that Abu Mohammad

—and my host in Aleppo, who’d introduced me to him—had set me up. He had an AK-47 in the car, but didn’t reach for it when they came at us. He insisted on being paid up-front for the ride and then made four stops before finally leaving the city. And even before all that, he just seemed . . . off.

When I told Oqba my thoughts on the subject, he agreed with me right away.

“You are a very smart man,” he said.

I felt myself tuning in to Edmond Dantés the more I thought about it; that old Bible quote Tolstoy used in the beginning of *Anna Karenina* constantly floating around in my head: “*Vengeance is mine; I will repay.*”

One night when the lights were out, General Mohammad paid us a visit with two of his subordinates. One was a guy I called Fenster (because he mumbled like Benicio Del Toro’s character in *The Usual Suspects* and kind of resembled him, too); the other one, pudgy with an expression of stone, was the type who just crackled with negative energy, a guy you knew was capable of horrific acts. He stood there impassively, shining his flashlight in our faces one by one like he was choosing his daily sacrifice. Mohammad, on the other hand, was in high spirits, joking around and laughing, telling us that we would all be going home soon, *Inshallah*—“by the will of God.” After a few minutes of this the lights came on and he left the room, returning a minute later with a blue plastic tub and an electric heater so we could bathe.

Later he came over and sat down next to me on the floor.

“Jumu’ahhhh!” he said like always, with a smile.

“How you doin’, Mohammad?” I asked.

We went back and forth for the next few minutes.

“You C-I-A?” he asked me.

“Nah, man,” I answered.

“Jumu’ah, bin Laden a good man.”

I sat there, trying to think of something to say to that.

“Well, he definitely was fascinating,” I allowed, shivering.

“You cold?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He said something to Fenster that sent him from the room, and a minute later he came back holding another blanket for me. Fenster was someone who I later heard had said he enjoyed torturing people because “it brought him closer to

God,” and I could feel the jealousy of everyone around me. All prisoners got two blankets, if they were lucky, and now I had four. Mohammad liked me, and everyone knew it. I later found out from Ali that he was the one who had informed the men I was coming to be their new cellmate, and that I was not to be bothered. This was a serious message to them: fuck with Jumu’ah and there *will* be blood.

It was on my fifth day with the POWs that the door opened and the Shabiha were ushered into the room. There were thirteen of them, all dressed in civilian clothing, ranging from their early twenties to sixty or so. Shabiha were not treated with the same respect as the soldiers. They were basically civilians who’d taken up arms to fight on the side of the regime, which made them far more despised by the opposition—al-Nusra, at least the group we were with, could respect a soldier’s duty to fight, whereas a Shabiha was just a traitor who’d turned his back on the revolution. Their chances of survival in an environment like this were much slimmer than mine given their lack of value.

I sensed an immediate shift in the room’s mood as the new inmates congregated in small groups all over the place. The cell was now crowded beyond its capacity; everyone was uncomfortable. None of the Shabiha had been given blankets, and I was ready to have to fight to keep what was mine if it came to that. There was an unspoken tension in the air. When I heard someone unlocking the door I remember praying to hear my name called so I could just be judged and go home already.

“Jumu’ah,” said a young voice.

“Yes!”

The voice told me to grab my blankets and follow him, which I did. Looking out through the bottom of my cap as we walked down the hallway, I saw a crowd of jihadis. We stopped at a door, and a second later I found myself locked back up, in an empty room this time.

Solitary again.

The new room was identical to the one I had been placed in my first day as a prisoner; the only difference was that this one had five blankets neatly folded into a bed on a plastic mat, bringing my grand total of blankets up to nine. Pipes ran from one side of the room to the other just below the windows, and within

minutes I was testing them to see whether they were strong enough to support my weight. Once I was sure they were, I hoisted myself up on them and pulled open the window. The bars over it didn't budge no matter how hard I yanked at them. There was a door over the window too, of course, but once I was lying against the bars I could see around the sides of it. There was open ground to my left, and if only I could figure a way out of that window I thought it would be an easy escape.

When I got down and dusted myself off, I noticed the best part of the room: it had a light switch. I turned it on, but the power was still out. A little while later, though, shortly after it got dark, the lights flickered on. I sat on my bed with a huge smile on my face, thanking God over and over again for giving me light. One night when I was with the POWs, I had awoken to find everyone asleep but the lights still on, so I got up and hit the switch. As soon as I did, I heard Oqba's voice.

"Can you turn the lights back on, please?"

I did what he asked and then motioned to everyone in the room.

"But why? Everyone's sleeping."

"I do not like the darkness," he said.

Now I understood. Light is one of those things we take for granted—when you're no longer in control of it, you realize its power. I resolved to myself that the lights would always stay on in this room, as long as the electricity was running, even while I slept. Within an hour, the door opened and one of the guards blurted something in Arabic and hit the switch. Even though I didn't understand a word that came out of his mouth I knew what he'd said, but as soon as he left I turned the light back on anyway. A few minutes later he returned, and when he saw the lights on he ran off screaming in anger. He returned with the Ghost Man.

"You will leave the lights out," said the Ghost Man sternly.

"Come on, man, can I have a candle then?"

"No." And they killed the lights and shut the door.

Back in black—not my best color.

"I gotta get outta here," I whispered into the dark.

When the Little Judge came to pay me a visit, I was lying down with my back to the door. Someone entered and tapped me on the shoulder. I turned and saw a

short, skinny man with glasses, standing over me wearing a black judge's robe open over a leather motorcycle jacket. He kind of resembled an Arab Himmler. You know the type—a little fucking weasel who could only rise to power in a time of war, thanks to his willingness to commit the atrocious acts no sane or rational being would ever even consider.

“Matthew?” he asked. He looked at me with unmistakable disgust.

“Yeah,” I said.

And that was it. He left without saying another word. I realized immediately that he was the same guy the Ghost Man had brought in the time I'd offered ten grand for my release, and kicked myself for not trying to engage him. Later, as a guard led me past the office on the way back from the bathroom, I tried to say something that would grab his attention.

“If I could speak to the judge I sure would be grateful,” I said loudly, right at the office door.

A few minutes after I was put back in my room, the door opened and there he was. He couldn't have been more than 120 pounds soaking wet and he spoke in a high-pitched voice that made my blood run cold.

“Matthew, what do you want?” he asked me impatiently, in English.

“I just want to introduce myself to you,” I said, rising with my hand out. “My name—”

“No,” he said, motioning for me to stay on the floor when I spoke to him. He didn't shake my hand either—the first person there not to do so.

“My name is Matthew Schrier and I'm a freelance photographer from America,” I said, from back on the floor.

He stood there staring at me for a moment, and then turned and left the room. A few hours had passed when he returned, this time with a piece of paper with all my credit card numbers written on it.

“What are the passwords?” he asked, holding it out to me.

“Five zero five zero, but that will only work for the ATM cards. The rest are just credit cards,” I answered.

I knew he wanted my online account passwords, but it was obvious that his English was too limited to express this, so every time he asked I just repeated the same thing. After a few rounds of this, frustrated, he left the room.

The Little Judge may not have been much to look at, but the more I got to know him the sharper and more cunning he would prove to be. It didn't take me long to realize that he was unlike any of the other high-level figures I would

meet there. He had a different kind of power than Mohammad. I got the impression that he was on the intelligence side of al-Nusra, which was appropriate, because if there was one thing the Little Judge was, it was intelligent.

It was during this time that I got to know Yassine. He had been put in charge of me, and would come to my room several times a day to ask if I needed anything. He seemed like a good kid, one who had yet to be transformed into a monster despite the monstrosities surrounding him.

“Good morning,” he would say pleasantly as he dropped off my breakfast. “I have something very delicious for you.”

Actually, the food was always the same crap, but Yassine liked practicing his English with me and for my part company was company, even if that company was a terrorist. At night the door opened and he repeated the same ritual with my dinner.

“Good morning,” he would say.

“No, no, no: you mean good *evening*,” I’d correct him.

I tried to Americanize him as much as possible without him really knowing it. For example, every time he entered the room I’d walk over with a clenched fist extended and give him a pound. He loved stuff like this, and to further build our rapport I’d teach him words like “brother” and “homie.” It didn’t take him long to develop a genuine affection for me, one that came complete with privileges forbidden to other prisoners.

One time I had a dream about this girl who I’d picked up when I was in Europe a few years earlier. The dream was the messy kind, and when it ended it was a real inconvenience, because I wasn’t wearing any underwear. I had taken off my boxer shorts five days earlier to wash them in the sink, but it was so cold in the room that it had taken them this long to dry. Now I put them on, wrapped the quilt around my waist like a towel, and knocked on the door, holding my soiled pants. Yassine opened it a few seconds later.

“Yes, Jumu’ah?”

“Yassine, I need to wash my pants,” I said, and I rubbed the fabric together like I was scrubbing laundry while showing him the stain. “I spilled some piss on them.”

“Ohhh—Okay, Jumu’ah, one second,” he said, with a knowing expression. I don’t know why I tried to fool him. The kid was a twenty-year-old virgin; of

course he knew what the stain was.

He left, but a little later the door opened again and Yassine took me down the hall to the bathroom. It was still early, and the building was dead silent. We were the only ones awake.

“You may see,” he said.

When I lifted my hat, there was a huge pot of steaming water in the middle of the floor. He had prepared a bath for me.

“I will lock you in here and you can bathe.”

I hadn't washed since I was with the soldiers, and a hot bath was just what I needed. I grabbed the soap, stripped down, and crawled into the pot, using a cup to pour water over my body. As amazing as the hot water felt, I knew I had to hurry or I'd risk getting sick due to the frigid temperature in the room. I was also motivated not to soak too long by the need to keep my tattoos hidden—I was never sure if Mohammad had noticed the one in the photograph of me at Carnival, seeing as the transvestites were pretty distracting. After I'd finished up and washed my cargos I knocked on the door, and Yassine came at once to return me through the silent halls to my cell.

It was the twenty-third of January when I met him. I had been back in solitary for thirteen days by then, and had gotten strangely used to the shells falling right outside my window during the day and the fighting that raged all night. I was sitting wrapped in my quilt, still waiting for my pants to dry even though it had been days since I washed them. Abruptly, the door opened and I was ordered from the room. I grabbed my pants and moved.

An endless stream of rebels marched past me in the hallway, all wearing the same desert camouflage pants. One of them stepped out in front of me, blocking my path. He lifted my chin until we made eye contact from under my cap; he was letting me know that he knew I had my eyes open. The jihadi then pulled the cap down to completely cover my face until I could see nothing at all. A second later I was locked in another room. When I uncovered my eyes I saw I was back with the POWs. The Shabiha were all gone. Ali and Rias were the first to come forward and greet me. They were both wearing huge smiles and Rias kept rubbing my shoulder in an endearing way.

“We are so happy to see you again,” said Ali. “You make everyone so happy. This time you can sleep and eat with us.”

I told him I was glad to be back. He took my damp pants to hang up and I went over to greet Oqba, but he was asleep. All at once, the door opened, and everyone turned to the wall. Since I didn't have any blankets to crash on I just stood with my face to a pillar. A crowd entered the room with flashlights that cut through the darkness and then I heard Mohammad's voice.

"Jumu'ahhhh!" he said. "What is this?"

I turned to see him motioning to the quilt I was wearing. Standing all around him were men I had never seen before, armed to the teeth with Uzis and AKs. They looked around at the prisoners like animals in a zoo as I began to explain about my pants. Mohammad cut me off impatiently.

"Jumu'ah, come, come!" he said, beckoning me to follow him out into the hallway.

He was excited, like a puppy that could barely contain itself before being let outside; I didn't even have to cover my eyes as he led me to the room next door. The rebels with the Uzis surrounded me as he turned the key, waiting to get a look as well.

"Mohammad, can I go get my blankets? Can I go get my blankets?" I kept asking desperately.

"Yes, yes, but you have to see!" he replied. Then he opened the door, launching himself inside to land in a crouch at the feet of the room's inmate.

"Ahhhhhh!" screamed General Mohammad, practical joker.

A man shot up with his hands raised against the flashlights shining in his eyes, babbling something in Arabic. He was filthy, with a long gray beard, and a yellow scarf wrapped around his head. His face was a mask of terror as he jabbered at Mohammad, and the jihadis all laughed. I had never seen someone so clearly traumatized in my life.

"American," Mohammad said to me, gesturing at the man.

"Yeah right," I replied. "Can I get my blankets now and go back in the other room?"

"No, no—American! You can stay in here now, and talk."

And that's when I looked more closely and saw that Mohammad wasn't joking. This guy really was an American.

"Oh my God," I whispered to myself.

He looked like he'd been there for a hundred years. After retrieving my blankets from solitary and sending someone to retrieve my pants from the other cell, they locked the two of us in the darkness together.

“You’re American?” I said, “Jesus Christ, they’re collecting us! Who are you? How long have you been here?”

“Three months.”

“Why are you here?”

“They think I’m a fucking CIA agent. I can’t believe you’re really here.”

“Yeah, well, believe it. What’s your name?”

“Theo.”

And that was it—the worst moment of my entire life, because now I knew they weren’t letting me go. They’d had me for three weeks and never let me see or hear him, this suspected CIA agent, which meant they’d been thinking about releasing me—but now that they knew I wasn’t going anywhere, it no longer mattered if I saw him, because there would be nobody I could tell.

Theo kept saying how happy he was that I had joined him, which kind of pissed me off because I was a little bummed out to be there. On the other hand, I can’t say I blamed him, especially after learning he’d been locked up for almost the whole three months by himself. Then he said he hoped they threw some more Westerners in with us so that he would have even more people to talk to.

“Why not just hope that they let you out, man?” I said, frustrated. “Wouldn’t that be better than wishing this upon people?”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” he said in his soft voice.

It felt like we were getting off to a bad start, so I changed the subject.

“All right, man, look: let’s get some important shit outta the way,” I said, mock serious. “Are you a fag?”

“No,” he replied.

“If you are it’s cool with me, man,” I said sincerely. “I have nothing against you. It’s just that if I wanna jerk off, you can’t watch. If you watch we’re gonna have a problem.”

I’d been trying to break the ice, get him to laugh, but Theo didn’t catch the humor and instead assured me seriously that he wouldn’t watch me beat off if the mood struck, so I changed the subject again—to how he’d landed in that room.

His story was definitely a unique one and I remember thinking all through it, *What the fuck did I do to get locked in a room with a guy like this?* If ever someone deserved the Darwin Award, it was him—he was to journalists basically what Gomer Pyle was to the marines in *Full Metal Jacket*. Theo’s journey began in Antakya, Turkey, a city on the Syrian border. He’d rented a

room in some ten-dollar-a-night hotel where Syrian refugees were known to congregate, in the hopes of making some contacts for his next story—which, ironically, he was hoping to write about Austin Tice, the first American journalist to go missing inside Syria. He even told me that he'd emailed Tice's editor before he left, asking the guy if he'd be interested in helping him finance an article about his missing colleague (something I later confirmed).

From: **theo** <theo.padnos [REDACTED]>
Date: Tue, Sep 25, 2012 at 7:35 PM
Subject: Re: about Austin Tice
To: [REDACTED]@mcclatchydc.com>

Dear Mr. [REDACTED],

I'm a freelancer who has worked in Yemen and Syria in the recent past. I have followed the story of your missing correspondent Austin Tice carefully and like everyone else am very concerned. I felt he did great work in Syria.

I think his work deserves some closer attention. Maybe also his life deserves some closer attention. I don't know much but my impression is that wherever this person went, people loved him. Also, he wrote beautifully.

And so I'm interested in inquiring around among my rebel contacts in Syria. I realize many of the contacts I have have already said what they know but perhaps somehow, somewhere I could find something new.

The reason I'm writing to you is this: would you be interested in or able to help me out somehow with this writing project? The thing I need the most: contact with editors in the States who might be in a position to commission such an article.

Some things I bring to this story: I speak Arabic, have lived in Syria on and off since 2007, know the places he went to, and was in Syria when he was doing his reporting. Like him, I spent a lot of time being afraid of the state security system. Its agents are certainly ruthless.

Obviously, I can't promise anything but I am about to go down to Antakya and..I just feel that it would be a shame while I'm there not to look more carefully into Austin's whereabouts. What do you think?
Theo Padnos

So anyway, he's at this cheap little hotel when he meets a seemingly nice Syrian boy of about twenty named Osama, with blonde highlights running through his black hair. Osama said he could hook Theo up with tour guides for his trip into Northern Syria. There were three of them, and they convinced Theo to cross the border illegally at night rather than use his valid passport. The next day, after they were across and spending the night at a remote location somewhere outside the city of Idlib, these tour guides beat the shit out of him, and then broke out the handcuffs.

“So you basically hired your kidnappers?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“So wait, you got kidnapped before you even entered Syria, and you didn't even know it?”

“No, they kidnapped me the next day.”

“No, they let you *in* on it the next day.”

My memory gets a little fuzzy here, but I remember him saying that after they had him, the kidnappers didn't know what to do. They discussed asking for four hundred thousand in ransom, but they didn't know how to collect it, so instead Theo was passed around from group to group like a puppy nobody wanted to keep. He was tortured several times during this period and didn't think he was going to last long.

“First they tried to waterboard me, but they didn't know how to do it,” he told me.

“What do you mean?”

“They cuffed me to a ladder in an empty pool and kept pouring buckets of water on me. Then they laid me down in a ditch that they dug and started covering me with dirt.”

At one point, he actually managed to escape. It was the middle of the night—he slipped out of the handcuffs with one of his kidnappers on the other end. Barefoot, he ran from the apartment where he was being kept out onto the street and flagged down a friendly vehicle. This Good Samaritan drove Theo directly to an FSA headquarters, where he was given a hot shower, a hot meal, brand-new clothes, and an apartment they kept especially for journalists. The next day they asked him whether he wanted to go home or go looking for the guys who'd taken him, and Theo chose option number two.

Theo should've remembered those old Taco Bell commercials and run straight for the border, but instead he was crammed into a car full of armed jihadis, looking for his kidnappers. After a while he actually spotted the car and pointed out one of the criminals. The FSA immediately pulled the car over and confronted the man, who claimed that he hadn't kidnapped Theo, he'd arrested him because he was a CIA agent. Whatever the kidnapper said must have been pretty convincing, because the FSA went from eager to help Theo to: “Well, you want him back?”

And just like that, Theo was returned to the very men he'd escaped from the night before. That night, the FSA and the thugs all had a party and tortured him together. Eventually—after a “trial” in Bab al-Hawa, on the Turkish/Syrian border, featuring the kidnapper he'd pointed out as the prosecution's star witness—he found himself first in a toilet stall that had been turned into a prison cell and then in a trunk for two hours on his way to this, his final destination. By the time his story was over I was exhausted.

Theo didn't know what year it was or even who the president was anymore, because they'd bagged him before the election. I thought about telling him Mitt Romney'd won, but after hearing his story I realized this guy was lost enough. It was astonishing how brain-dead he'd become—how could he know what day he had been taken in late October, and that he'd been there for three months, and still think it was 2012? I started freaking out on the inside—was this what I would become in another two months?

At one point I mentioned General Mohammad, saying he seemed to be a good one.

“No, he's not good,” Theo said. “He's bad.”

“Why?”

“Because he tortured me.”

That was the first time I heard about the tire, but I cut him off before he finished telling me all the details. I really wasn't in the mood.

Although this room was identical in size and color to the one I'd been in at the beginning, there were a few differences, some good and some not so good. The good news was that nobody had ripped out Theo's light switch. The bad was that, whether Theo was a spy or not, it was obvious our captors were thoroughly convinced that he was: They had not only ripped the entire radiator from the wall so he couldn't stand on it to reach the window, they'd torn out all the pipes along the walls. On top of that, even though the window was completely blocked off from the outside with grain bags filled with gravel, they'd electrified the bars as well—though with the electricity out so often it was far from Jurassic Park.

As soon as I noticed the light switch I flipped it up and asked why it was off in the first place. Theo explained that he never used it, and certain things began to make sense. There were tons of bread crumbs scattered on the floor all around him, where he slept and ate. At first I'd thought this was because he was a slob, but in reality they were there because he was a slob *and* because he mostly ate in the dark, even when he didn't have to. He had been lying in the blackness alone for the past three months, vegetating, too scared even to get up and turn on the lights.

Without the lights on it was practically pitch-black in the room, with the only illumination filtering in through the bags of gravel in tiny cracks. It wasn't until the lights flashed on that I saw what had been carved into the wall next to the door. It was abstract, but there was still no mistaking it.

“Is that a Star of David?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Did you do that?”

“Yeah, they don’t know what it is.”

By now I knew that he wasn’t Jewish.

“Are you fucking stupid? You don’t think any of them have seen an Israeli flag?”

I could not believe someone could be so ignorant and arrogant at the same time. It was obvious that he didn’t think much of the enemy, which made him a serious liability, and I realized he would have to be watched like a baby fresh out of the womb.

It was hard not to wring his neck for putting me in the position of having to scratch out my own religious symbol in a place where I needed faith more than ever. I had never been very religious, but had always been proud to be a Jew. I’d been fascinated by our history and had read about it voraciously, absorbing stories about the perseverance of the Jewish people and the challenges we had overcome. Now, I felt like it was my turn to uphold this tradition of grit and determination, surviving the impossible like so many others had in the millennia before me.

Within a day or two of arriving in my new cell I met the emir for the first time, as he showed us off to some visitors. In Arabic, “emir” means “prince,” and every militia group has one leading it. Here the emir’s name was Muawiyah—he was surprisingly young, in his early thirties. He wore glasses and confidence well together, and like Mohammad, carried a pistol in a shoulder holster.

“*Assallam alekum*,” I said when he entered, extending my hand.

He nodded and shook it, a gesture that shocked Theo because they’d never shaken his—they don’t usually extend this courtesy to infidels. Then he handed us a few pieces of cinnamon like those he’d been nibbling on when he entered. He and his visitors didn’t say much, just looked at us. We were the exotics in his zoo and the emir was proud to display us.

A few days later I asked Yassine if I could have another bath. Theo hadn’t had one at all in the three months since he’d arrived and emitted an odor so foul it was making the paint peel, so I figured this would be a good chance to get him one, too. At first Yassine refused to even consider it.

“No! He is a criminal!” he’d shouted, but I kept complaining about the

stench and eventually he gave in.

A hot pot was prepared for me and then one for Theo. They also gave us each a brand-new pair of sparkling-white underwear and a clean tee shirt. When Theo walked in he looked refreshed and thanked me.

“Did Yassine search you after your bath?” he asked.

“No, why?”

“Because he searched me.”

“So what? Did he find anything on you?” I asked, sensing that Theo had done something wrong.

“Yeah, a piece of paper with writing on it.”

Apparently, after Theo’s arrival, the emir had given him a red pen and some paper. Minutes after he finished explaining this to me, the Little Judge and Yassine burst into the room.

“Where’s the red pen!” screamed Yassine, throwing Theo up against the back wall.

“Hey, Jumu’ah,” said the Little Judge casually, walking by me without so much as a glance. He was holding a 9mm pistol and wearing a Puma baseball cap.

They didn’t beat Theo on this occasion, just put him against the wall as if they might execute him on the spot as they searched the room for the pen.

The first time I saw Yassine hit him I have to admit I almost laughed—which sounds horrible, I know. Look, judge me after you’ve spent time in a terrorist prison. Anyway, Yassine stood at the door, holding an AK-47 by the barrel. He called Theo over and then balled up his free hand.

“I know karate,” he said, wearing a big smile.

“Really?” Theo replied.

And then Yassine demonstrated his Wu-Tang style by punching him, right in the rib cage.

“Do you want to see more? Do you want to see more?” he asked enthusiastically.

“No, no, that’s enough,” said Theo.

It was weird seeing that side of Yassine. With me he was always respectful and even protective, but with Theo there was nothing but pure, brutal hatred. Our captors all hated Theo, the spy, and I only really realized how fortunate I was in my treatment when I compared myself to him. At first I tried sticking up for him when the guards beat on him, but I quickly saw that my attempts to do so were

futile. They just enjoyed it too much.

Another time, the Little Judge came storming into the room and kicked him in the chest while wearing bubblegum-pink Crocs. I had seen these slippers through the bottom of my cap while on bathroom runs on many occasions, but never knew who was wearing them. All I knew was that whoever they belonged to always tripped Theo and then booted him in the ass as he stumbled like a clown. I don't even know why he kicked him that day. He just busted into the room, stomped Theo's chest, and then started yelling at him in Arabic with his hands on his hips. He was so mad spit was flying out of his mouth and all over Theo. Then he left as suddenly as he arrived and slammed the door behind him. I think he was just blowing off some steam.

Picture being locked in a room with your polar opposite, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with no end in sight. Sharing a cell with another American could have been something that made me feel less alone, but it didn't work out that way; instead it made things worse, being that it kind of felt like I was locked in a room with John du Pont. As much as I felt sorry for Theo, I began to despise him almost as soon as I met him. Not because he was stupid or because he was weak—I despised him because he didn't seem to have an ounce of loyalty in his entire body, or even really understand the concept. To me, his motivation for entering Syria in the first place demonstrated this perfectly.

“So you came here to try and make money off of Tice?” I'd asked, early in his story.

“That's the point,” he said.

To me this meant that if I had gone missing first, he would have been just as eager to use *my* bad luck to make some money and give his career a boost. The fact that he was there to exploit the misfortune of another American who was in the exact same position as me was hard to accept. It was a blow to my morale; in my darker moments it made me wonder what I had done to deserve the same fate as someone who had all but asked for what happened to him by letting greed and ambition completely obliterate common sense.

Theo told me that besides being a journalist who'd written two books, one of which “briefly examined” Islamic extremism, he was also a professor (which turned out to be a lie), and that his goal was to become an expert on Middle Eastern affairs and give lectures on the region for boatloads of money, like the guy in *The Da Vinci Code*. Unfortunately, things didn't seem to be working out

for him at the moment, and his once-impressive résumé, along with the fact that he had lived in Yemen and Damascus and yet didn't have a soul in the entire country to vouch for him, all only made him look more like a spy. When I asked how exactly an American citizen goes about living in Damascus for two years, he said the government didn't know he was there, at one point going so far as to say he was "undercover"—yet at the same time he had a valid visa, issued by the Syrian government. Nothing he told me ever added up. He even had two names, Theo Padnos and Peter Theo Curtis; the jihadis didn't know about the first one, which he asked me to keep between us.

Along with Arabic, Theo also spoke French, German, and Russian.

"Why would they ever think you're a spy?" I remember saying when I heard that one.

As if having them think he was a spy wasn't bad enough, he'd "confessed" immediately the first time he was tortured, saying whatever they wanted in order to get them to stop after just one lick. No matter what he told them now, he remained an "admitted" CIA agent, a prize the jihadis weren't about to give up. At first I admit that I wondered about him myself, but it was so obvious from the way the guy took a beating that he'd never been in so much as a playground scuffle, much less had any type of formal training.

I think what bothered me most was that he was such an arrogant prick, thinking that his PhD and the five languages he spoke counted for anything in this environment. Well, they counted, but not as the assets he seemed determined to believe they were. He wasn't on a college campus; school was out, and he was in a secret Syrian terrorist prison where all of these skills worked against him. Not only did they make him look more like a spy, he couldn't seem to help showing them off. No one likes a show-off, and every smart eight-year-old I've ever met knows how to act around bullies if you want to keep from having the shit kicked out of you. The man didn't seem to have a shred of common sense or any street smarts at all—and this put me in considerable danger. In the three months he'd been there he hadn't bothered to learn the name of a single guard, or attempted to build any kind of rapport with them. When I explained that this was why they were so hard on him and suggested he change his tune, he just snapped at me.

"I don't need your advice," he said.

It's a good thing he wasn't a spy. If the CIA ever employed this guy it would be the end of America as we know it.

To pass the time we started playing 20 Questions. At first it was great, because we both loved history and literature, but once we went through pretty much everyone in those two categories the game went downhill fast. Theo kept giving me either people who were impossible to guess or those I had never heard of, like Ray Kroc.

“Who the fuck is Ray Kroc, man?” I asked, pissed.

“He founded McDonald’s,” Theo replied.

“What? You mean it wasn’t founded by a McDonald?”

“No.”

“Who knows this stuff ?” I said. “Look, you have to choose people everyone knows!”

One time I gave him Betty White and he didn’t know who *she* was, so we got into a fight about that.

“How can you not know who Betty White is?” I asked.

“I’ve never heard of her,” Theo answered.

“How can you never hear of Betty White? Every American knows who Betty White is! She’s a Golden Girl!”

“What’s a Golden Girl?”

“Oh my God! I gotta get out of this fuckin’ room!”

The next game I picked was feeding each other famous lines from movies.

“Say hello to my little friend!” I said, in a horrible Cuban accent.

A silence ensued.

“I don’t know it,” said Theo.

“Come on, man, how can you not know that? I’ll do it again for you: *Say hello to my lee-tle friend!*”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, man, you’ve never seen *Scarface*?”

“No.”

“How could you have not seen *Scarface*? I mean, what did you watch when you were growing up?”

“We didn’t have a TV.”

“Were you poor?”

“No.”

“So what did you do for fun?”

“We read.”

That game lasted less than five minutes.

Another thing I tried was ridiculous “what if” questions.

“Hey, Theo, what if they came in here with a pistol and one bullet and said ‘Kill Matt and we’ll let you go’? Would you do it?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

“Really?” I asked, taken aback.

“Yeah, this is war. You have to do what you have to do to survive.”

It took me a few moments to absorb this information—and the fact that he was completely serious.

“Well, I would never do that to you, because I would never be able to look at myself in the mirror again after I went home,” I said, disgusted.

An uncomfortable silence followed.

“Oh, I take it back,” he said, eventually.

I knew I had gotten in over my head in Syria, but I could hold my breath for a really long time. Theo had drowned a while ago. I don’t think he realized that some shit you just couldn’t take back—like telling somebody you would kill him for a ride to the border. This was one of the most revealing conversations we had in our first few days together, because it let me know that I could never trust him, or ever tell him that I was really Jewish.

Sometimes they would leave massive dried-up pools of blood on the floor for us to see on the way to the bathroom, and the traumatized look on Theo’s face resembled that of a kid who just walked in on his dad having sex with another man. Once in the bathroom I would bullshit with Yassine while Theo was taking care of his business, but if Theo finished first, making conversation was up to him. I had really tried to teach him how to work the guards, and some days he seemed to be getting the hang of it. It was good to see Theo speaking to them so he could try to form some kind of a relationship and improve his treatment. I tried to support him, out of patriotism if nothing else, because maintaining American principles and values in this place that despised them was very important to me—and Americans are always supposed to stick together in war.

One day, I came out of the stall to find Yassine and Theo discussing a very sensitive topic—women.

“How many girlfriends do you have in America?” Yassine asked.

“Uh, none now, but I’ve had about nine,” Theo replied.

“Nine!” said Yassine, wide-eyed.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” I mumbled, knowing that this was *haram*.

“Jumu’ah, how many girlfriends do you have in America?” Yassine asked me.

“Zero,” I said. “I’ve only had one in my life and I was with her for over nine years. We were supposed to get married, but it didn’t work out, and I’ve been looking for a wife ever since.”

This answer was only half true, but safer than Theo’s—I basically admit that I’ve had sex, but not with more than one woman; only with the one I thought would become my wife. After this, we headed home to our cell. It was a conversation Yassine would not quickly forget.

Sometimes to help myself keep it together, I would imagine that there was a camera transmitting everything that happened in the room back home to every house in America, kind of like in *The Truman Show*. It was a great way to shift my perspective, to stay strong and cut down on the unavoidable moments of overwhelming despair. On the other hand, this tactic also created a new problem, namely how to entertain all my viewers, who weren’t even real. After all, the days weren’t exactly eventful. To make sure my ratings stayed high, I figured I had to make the audience laugh on occasion, which was, of course, where my cellmate came in.

I remember, while Theo snored a foot away from me, staring at his piss bottle—a green two liter with the label ripped off that had obviously once held 7Up or Sprite. Then I’d shift my vision over to his water bottle, which was also green without a label.

I cannot tell you how many times I thought about switching them so I could watch him drink his own piss, and maybe end the entire nightmare by laughing myself to death along with everyone watching back home.

The first time I almost lost it and beat the shit out of Theo was about a week into our time together. I was sleeping soundly . . . until a sound woke me up.

Click! Click! Click!

The sound was coming from Theo’s mouth. He was cleaning his teeth with a shell he’d saved from a sunflower seed. I very politely asked him to stop so I could get back to sleep, but he was feeling confrontational that day.

“No, I’m brushing my teeth,” he said, clicking away.

“You have all day to brush your teeth. Can’t you just let me sleep as much of

this day away as possible?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s gonna be pretty hard to do that without any teeth in your mouth,” I said.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Absolutely! Stop makin’ that sound or I’m gonna fuck you up!”

“Okay, I’ll stop for twenty minutes.”

Now I was really getting angry. Again I warned him to lay off his fucking teeth. He gave me some smart-ass answer, but he stopped, so I closed my eyes and tried to drift off. About fifteen minutes later he started up again, only louder. I leapt from my bed screaming obscenities and he rose, too. As soon as he talked back I attacked him, ready to rip his head from his body, but he responded by immediately falling to the floor, flat on his face with his hands out, shaking like a scared little kid.

“Go ahead!” he cried. “It’s bad enough that these assholes torture me! Now you’re going to do it, too?”

I’d been standing over him, clenched fist raised and ready to drop with the force of a cinder block, but the fact that his defense mechanism involved falling helplessly to the floor made me feel ashamed of myself.

“Just stop makin’ that noise! I’ll fuckin’ kill you—and they hate you so much they’d probably let me do it!”

He agreed to stop until later and I lay back down under my covers, but I was too agitated to return to sleep.

Back home, Theo still lived in his mother’s house on eighty-five acres of land in Vermont, with a lake and a barn. But he wasn’t exactly a farm boy—it was obvious that he’d never worked a hard day in his life, the result being that whenever Theo had a job to do, he would fuck it up. About once a week one of the guards would dump a few tubs of soapy water in the room and bring us a squeegee and a broom to clean the floor with. I had done this a couple of times in solitary and knew that we didn’t have much time once the door was closed, so I grabbed the broom and got right to work, scrubbing my way from the back of the room to the front. Since the electricity was out, we were doing this task almost blind. About five minutes later, the door opened so we could push the water out. Theo, for some reason, decided to start doing this from the center of the room.

“Theo, what are you doin’?” I said, shaking my head. “You start in the back and then you work your way forward! Why are you starting there? You’re just gonna get it wet again!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, walking to the back of the room.

A minute later the guard came back to the door and started rushing Theo, which didn’t help. When he’d finally squeegeed what he thought was the last of the filthy water out into the hall, the broom and squeegee were taken away and the door was locked. As soon as I took a step, my foot landed in a huge puddle . . . right in the middle of the room.

“What the fuck?” I said in disbelief. “*Ahhh!* You can’t do anything right!”

“Oh God, you know what? If it’s not them, it’s you,” he said.

“Oh, pardon me, man, for being pissed that you left Lake fuckin’ Superior in the middle of our room!” I screamed at him. “It’s gonna take like two weeks for that to dry! I swear to God, if you were a Bad News Bear you’d be Timmy fuckin’ Lupus!”

I was on the verge of madness, and it wasn’t because of the terrorists. It was because of this guy. I began to accuse Theo of being squeegee negligent as if it were a real crime—and knowing those Sharia courts, it probably was. He was lucky the puddle wasn’t a little deeper, or I might have tried to drown him in it.

One night, I started to itch. It began on my legs and I scratched all night, waiting for the lights to come on so I could check my clothes. I thought I’d avoided bedbugs by keeping my distance from the POWs, but it turned out the bugs weren’t from the front lines, they were from the blankets. When the lights came on I lifted my shirt and saw two of them right away, crawling across the fabric.

“Oh no,” I said.

They were each about the size of a kiwi seed, and must have been feasting on me for a while because when I squashed them against the wall they left huge smears of my blood behind. I was infested from my underwear out—every article of clothing I had, except my hat and socks, were crawling with the critters and the eggs they left behind. Theo refused to check himself, saying that he didn’t have any. I could tell right away that he was in bedbug denial.

It’s a traumatic experience being covered in parasites, feeling them crawling all over you and growing fat off of your blood. It makes you feel like an animal. “American dogs,” we came to call ourselves.

The Little Judge had visited me several times in solitary, holding my credit cards and asking for the passwords, but I kept explaining that they weren't ATM cards and pretending not to know what he was getting at. He even sent a couple of armed thugs to ask once, but neither spoke English so they didn't get very far either. On January thirty-first, exactly one month since my arrival, he brought in some English-speaking jihadis to clear that problem right up.

It was late when our door opened and I was ordered from the cell. A guard led me across the hall into the office and placed me on the floor by the stove.

"How are you?" asked someone with a French Canadian accent.

"Never better," I said as he lifted my cap.

I was sitting in a circle with five people: the emir, three young guys in black masks, and an older man with an air of authority lying on his side, Buddha style. The emir immediately placed a tea glass in front of me and filled it to the brim. There were guns everywhere, but none were being pointed at me.

One of the three wearing masks took the lead in the interrogation. He was in his twenties, with droopy eyes and some red in his beard. He sat to my right with his AK across his lap. Another of the young men, a pudgy one, sat to my left, and next to him was the third masked man, who I sensed was the leader among the three. He was big and wore black-rimmed glasses over his mask.

The three of them asked me some basic questions about who I was and explained that they'd been brought into the process due to the language barrier. They gave me the same spiel about how I was in a court and would be released soon if I was telling the truth. After the small talk they got right down to business and handed me a blank sheet of paper and a pen. I was instructed to write down everything about myself—my Social Security number, online passwords for email, bank accounts, and credit cards, for Facebook, my website, and Verizon, along with any other information that I thought might help them in their investigation.

"Look, I gotta tell you I'm not sure about all these passwords," I said. "I keep them all written down next to my computer so I never really committed them to memory."

"Do your best," said Redbeard. "Have you ever been in the military?"

"No."

"Because if you have," Chubs piped up, "you'd better tell us, or else you're in trouble."

During the interrogation the man lying like Buddha observed everything but

only spoke a few times, always in a very polite and hospitable way. After I had written down everything the masked men wanted and answered their questions, they changed the subject to politics.

“What do you think about the war in Iraq?” Glasses asked me.

“I think it was wrong and I was against it,” I responded, telling them exactly what I thought they wanted to hear.

“Because we don’t like Saddam Hussein, but—”

“But it’s not the job of the United States to force-feed a revolution down another people’s throat? I agree,” I said, cutting him off.

This response seemed to please them and ended the conversation before it had really begun. All in all, they were very professional. *Maybe there really is an investigation*, I told myself. Maybe I really was going to be released soon.

When I returned to my cell, Theo was shocked to see me.

“Wow, you were gone so long I thought they’d let you go,” he said.

Two days later, the masked men returned. After I’d been escorted into the office again, my face lit up upon seeing them.

“All right!” I said. “You guys here to take me home? Everything work out all right?”

“No,” said Redbeard. “None of the passwords worked.”

I wasn’t surprised but acted shocked. Resting in front of him on a coffee table was a white laptop. The emir and Glasses sat behind the desk, talking in Arabic. I sat down across from Redbeard, next to Chubs, and he turned the laptop toward me while picking up a chrome pistol-grip shotgun and ordered me to log in to my bank account. After a few failed attempts I managed to log in and show them my savings, which amounted to over sixteen grand, with another nine in my business account. Then we moved on to my credit cards. After I logged in to those, they looked over all my purchases and questioned me on them. They weren’t happy about the cigarettes, but I explained the logic of buying them duty-free and for some reason they accepted that. Then we moved on to my email, which for the life of me I could not seem to access.

“Shit!” I said. “It’s not working!”

“Don’t curse,” said Redbeard.

“Try again,” said Chubs.

I did, but got nothing. Chubs told me to reset the password and have it sent to an email address he typed in. I did as I was told and was prompted to answer my security questions. The first question was my mother’s middle name.

“My mother doesn’t have a middle name,” I told them, which was true.

“Then put in her maiden name,” said Redbeard.

“Her maiden name?” I asked, filling with dread.

This was a big problem, both because I knew it was the answer I’d used, and for another reason.

“Yes,” said Redbeard. “What is her maiden name?”

“I’ll just type it in,” I said, and did it quickly.

It worked—we were in.

“What’s the maiden name?” said Chubs. “I need to write it down.”

They were all looking at me, waiting for the answer.

“. . . Grossberg,” I said, as if waiting to hear the gunshot a second later, but all I got in return was a thank-you. Apparently they didn’t know it was a Jewish name. A few minutes later we were back to discussing politics, and then I was escorted back to my room.

I’d noticed the round silver-dollar-sized impression in the center of the bottom half of the door early on, but never asked about it. For some reason, I didn’t think Theo was stupid enough to dig a hole that big right there in the open. I was wrong.

“What’s that hole in the door?” I finally asked one day when the lights were on, pointing at it.

“I made it with a spoon,” he answered. “The wood is really soft.”

“Yeah, but what was the point? What, were you trying to dig your way outta here?”

“I don’t know. I was bored.”

Later he admitted that he was trying to make a peephole . . . *in the middle of the door*. I guess he figured, much like the Star of David he made, they wouldn’t recognize a hole when they saw one. I told him there was absolutely no point in taking that kind of risk, considering what the repercussions would be, and that there was no benefit from it—I mean, what the fuck would we do with a peephole? Theo disagreed with me. He thought he’d proved it was possible to burrow through the wood and turn the key on the other side before anyone would notice. I disagreed with him right back on that one.

Sometimes I looked at Theo and saw a forty-four-year-old boy. He hated to share

—and sharing was crucial in our situation. He chewed with his mouth open, making a squishing sound every time he opened and closed his hole, like a dirty mop being wrung out. One time he walked up to a flat piece of concrete about the size of a candy bar that had fallen from the wall behind the door. Without hesitation he stomped on it, breaking it into dozens of pieces and making a mess—all so he could kick a chunk around the room like a soccer ball. I don't like living in filth, and I told him to clean it up about a hundred times, but he shrugged it off like every other suggestion I ever gave him—as if he was doing such a great job of taking care of himself thus far. Sometimes I really did feel like George Milton.

It was around this time that I started talking seriously about an escape. I wasn't planning to burrow through the center of the door, Theo-style: The door was made of solid wood, but it was paneled, and along the edges of these indentations the wood was only about a centimeter or two thick. My plan was to perforate the edges where the wood was very thin and then kick the panel out one night when the area was getting shelled or some other, better opportunity presented itself. I figured that if we got lucky and the building took a direct hit, we might be able to execute the plan without being heard. It was a one-in-a-million chance, but the building did get hit several times while we were there, so it wasn't impossible. On our trips to the bathroom I had been accumulating anything and everything that I thought might be of use. One of the most valuable items was a three-inch brass flathead screw that I took from a light switch casing that had been ripped out. But the screw was obviously not enough; we needed something to turn it with, and one day I found that something, resting on the sink. It came in the form of a flat little iron bracket, about four inches long.

“Put it back!” said Theo as I stuck it in my sock.

“Shut up!”

“They put it there as a trap! If they find that they're going to torture us!”

“Then let's hope they don't find it. Now shut up. They're coming.”

A few seconds later Yassine unlocked the bathroom door and we were past the point of no return.

“Come,” he said.

Theo and I stood there for a moment, waiting to see if he'd notice the missing piece of iron, but he didn't, and a minute later we were back in our cell. Theo was furious, flipping out about what was going to happen when whoever

put it there found the bracket missing.

“Dude, would you calm down?” I said. “Now boost me up so I can stash it in the window.”

“No, no, you shouldn’t have done that! You shouldn’t have done that!” he kept saying.

Within a few minutes we heard the guards taking the men in the cell next to ours on a bathroom run. This calmed Theo down a little, because now if someone realized it was missing we wouldn’t be the only suspects. It didn’t stop his bitching entirely, however, so it was obvious that I would need a better stash spot than the window if I were ever to have a moment’s rest again.

On the ceiling were three fixtures containing long fluorescent tube lights. The fixture closest to the window had popped out of the ceiling on one side, making it the perfect hiding place. I stood on Theo’s shoulders while he leaned against the wall, and then I turned myself around so I was facing the light, holding on to the ceiling to keep my balance. Once I was in reach of the light I stuck the bracket into the fixture and popped it back into place.

“There, you happy?” I said. “They could come in here with a fuckin’ K-9 and still not find that thing.”

Now that this was settled, it was time to talk about the plan—but of course we argued about that, too.

The bottom panel of the door was about the length and width of a milk crate. I made one test hole along the indentation in the top right-hand corner to assess the strength of the wood and how long it would take. In less than five minutes, the screw was through, and had barely been stripped.

“No, I don’t want to do it that way,” said Theo. “I say we perforate the wood next to the doorknob and then punch it out and turn the key.”

The key was always left in the lock, but that part of the door was solid wood several inches thick. I argued that we would need a drill to pull it off, and even if we had one, the guards would notice the holes as soon as they approached the door. Theo’s answer was that we wouldn’t go all the way through until we were ready to leave.

“But we don’t know when we’re gonna leave!” I said. “It’s not like the regime gives us notice before they bomb the place!”

“Well, then we’re not going,” he said bitchily. “It’s always either your plan or nothing.”

“All right, fine!” I yelled. “My mother’s sixty-fifth birthday is in twenty-four days and I am *not* gonna ruin it by being in here!”

As you can see, my thinking was not exactly rational at this point, but yes, somehow I let him talk me into his stupid plan. Besides, I was certain that Theo would come around to doing things my way once he saw that the screw was never going to make it through the thickest part of the door.

The doorknob was chrome, set in a rectangular plate about ten inches long and five inches wide. After examining it, I figured our best bet was to first dig into the wood directly along the side of the plate, in order to keep our efforts concealed for as long as possible. When I pressed the corner of the bracket into the wood and dragged it downward, it made a slight indentation. When I did it again the indentation was a little deeper. I kept at this for maybe twenty minutes as they walked past the door on the other side—which they did constantly—until I stopped making progress. Now it was time to break out the screw. They rarely closed the door after they entered the room, and the mark I’d made wasn’t noticeable at a glance, so the chances of them finding it were slim as long as no one decided to inspect the door closely.

“Theo,” I said. “Come here, I wanna show you somethin’.”

I showed him what I’d done, explaining that it was very important for us to stick to this one spot until it was ready in case they ever inspected the door. He agreed and went right back to bed.

Now that I had gotten as far as I could with the bracket alone, I started using it as a screwdriver: I stuck the screw in the groove that I’d made and turned it. It didn’t go in easy due to the thickness of the door, and I kept stripping the screw. Eventually my fingers were bleeding so I passed the bracket to Theo and let him take a spin at it while I rested. After a few minutes, I got up to see what he had done. It was a disaster: instead of staying along the edge as we’d discussed, he’d just started digging a new groove horizontally away from the plate.

“What are you, fuckin’ retarded?” I asked, ripping the bracket from his hand. “Are you trying to get us tortured? Stay along the plate! That’s the plan!”

And on I went, but my explanations were useless. It was clear that Theo could have no part in orchestrating his own escape plan—it would have been suicide to rely on him for anything. If I hadn’t stopped him when I did, his new groove would have been as noticeable as the one he’d dug into the middle of the door. So, with my fingers still raw, I returned to work.

Looking back, I really don’t know what I was thinking. It was completely

absurd to believe that we would ever be able to pull it off. I mean, I couldn't even get the screw one centimeter into the wood, it was so solid. The longer I worked at it, the more I stripped the screw, and every time I did, the bracket made a loud click of metal on metal that made us freeze. We knew that if anybody heard what we were doing we were in deep shit—but we were in deep shit anyway so why not just double down, was my frame of mind.

Click!

A moment of silence, and then:

“Stop messing with the door,” Mohammad said from the hallway.

“Shit!” I whispered, rushing over to sit on my bed. After a minute I got up again and paced, holding the bracket and screw, trying to think of the best place to hide them if this happened again, since there obviously wouldn't be time to stash them in the light.

That was when I heard the key turn. I tossed the screw into the middle of the floor to hide it in plain sight and threw the bracket under my blankets.

I was sitting again by the time Mohammad forced open the door, accompanied by Yassine and another thug I had never seen before. The electricity was out, and all three carried flashlights. Mohammad immediately started examining our side of the door while the unknown thug shined his light over our piss bottles.

“Mohammad, I was just cleaning my nails out on the door,” I said.

Theo and I were ordered to stand in the back of the room, and this was when the thug lifted my blanket and found the bracket. I was sure he was going to dig it into the flesh of my face and drag it down, but all he did was walk up to me and hold it in front of my eyes.

“Jumu'ah!” said Mohammad, kneeling by the door.

He'd found the impression Theo had made with the spoon months before—the “peephole.” Mohammad motioned me over, and when I knelt beside him he furiously pointed to the gouge in the door.

“Mohammad, that was already there,” I said, honestly. “I swear to God.”

He looked down. At his feet was a small pile of broken concrete pieces, the mess Theo had made so he could kick a piece of rubble around the room like a soccer ball. Mohammad picked up a chunk of concrete, examined it, and then placed it in the impression in the door and turned it from side to side—obviously imagining that this is what he'd heard us doing. Just my luck: it fit perfectly.

Mohammad turned to look me in the eye. A seriousness had overtaken his

usually animated face, and in that two or three seconds as he stared at me, I knew I was finally meeting his darker half.

“Mohammad . . .” I said slowly, looking at Theo to see if he was going to fess up to making the mark in the door. Theo just stood there, silently watching events unfold.

By the time I turned my head back to Mohammad our punishment had begun. I saw the first punch coming and blocked it so that his fist only grazed the side of my head. The second one I blocked completely. Now on his feet, Mohammad dealt me a swift kick to the abdomen and then brought the piece of concrete down on the back of my head with wrecking-ball force. Stunned by the blow, I heard him instruct Yassine to tend to me, and I was dealt another kick as he moved on to Theo.

Theo hadn't moved—Mohammad grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and threw him against the back wall. He fell to the ground flat on his face with his hands out, shaking. As Mohammad shined the light in Theo's face, he took out his Glock. I ran over as he pointed it down at Theo's head.

“Mohammad, please don't do it!” I begged. “Please don't shoot him! I'm sorry, it was my fault!”

“I am going to come back in ten minutes to beat you,” said Mohammad to Theo in Arabic, while holstering his weapon. “And then come back at night to beat you some more. Take their beds!”

A second later they were dragging our beds and blankets out into the hallway and we were once again alone. That's when Theo translated what Mohammad had said. There was a moment of silence.

“Hey, I don't mean to be a dick, but did he say he's gonna beat me too?” I asked.

“No,” answered Theo. “This is bad. We need our beds or we're going to get sick.”

I told him not to worry about the beds, that I would talk to Mohammad and get them back. I waited a few minutes and then started banging on the door.

“Mohammad, come on, man, talk to me,” I called out. “This is all just a misunderstanding!”

After a few minutes of this, Yassine appeared. He looked enraged.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I wanna talk to Mohammad.”

“No!”

“Well then, how about a bathroom run?”

“No, no bathroom! No food! Never again!” he shouted, slamming the door.

About ten minutes later, he returned and dropped a tray of olives and yogurt for us, then left without saying a word. Theo had lost his appetite, so I ate alone. Not long after this we heard a large group of people assembling outside our door and looked at each other with dread. When the door opened, standing there were about eight men wearing masks, dressed in black from head to toe. One entered and, after telling Theo to cover his eyes, cuffed him with his hands behind his back. Then they led him away and locked me in by myself. Theo didn't say a word. A minute or two later the chilling sound of his screams came floating through the hallway and crashing into my ears. I paced back and forth, praying to God to make it stop and for them not to take me next, but I was pretty sure my luck in this area had run out.

Shortly after the screams had faded into silence, the door opened. It was the same group, only now two of the men were holding Theo up by his arms. He was soaking wet below the waist from peeing himself. They threw him violently to the ground, blood from his battered ankles smearing all over the floor of the cell, and then took off the handcuffs. One of the men motioned for me to turn around and put my hands behind my back.

“*Yala,*” he said.

Unlike Theo I didn't go quietly—I pleaded with them to reconsider and explained again and again that it was all a mistake, even though I knew none of them understood a word I was saying. I was hoping that maybe my insistence would need no translation, and I kept it up all the way down the hallway, right up until we entered the boiler room. The room was not big, and from what I could see from under my cap, it was packed. It was obvious that they'd chosen this room to torture people in for a reason: dim and dirty, lit by a single bulb that made the shadows truly haunting, it had all the makings of a nightmare, with the echo of a thousand screams in the air.

The first two people I noticed were a fourteen-year-old boy, who kicked me (*Jesus Christ, they have kids in here!* I remember thinking), and a man holding a nightstick. They sat me down on the floor near a hulking black oil tank, with my knees bent so that they almost touched my chin. A second later a tire was forced around my knees and locked into place with a steel bar that they slid into the crook between my knees and the tire, making it impossible to move my legs. The man holding the nightstick placed it under my chin and used it to lift my head so that we could make eye contact from under my cap. We stared at each other for a

few intense moments, and I noticed that what he was holding was not a nightstick after all, but a black cable just as thick. Then someone flipped me over so that I was face down with my feet in the air. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Buddha Man sitting off to my right.

“I’m just a photographer!” I yelled in Arabic.

“Give him one fifteen,” the Buddha Man said—in English.

“No, wait, wait!”

“What?” he asked, impatiently.

I racked my brain for something to say, anything that would make them change their minds. I had nothing.

“I love the Syrian people?” I tried, sounding truly pathetic.

“*Shuuuuuuut up,*” the Buddha Man said. “*Yala!*”

I took a breath so deep I felt my nostrils suck all the way in.

“Here we go! Get ready to scream!” I whispered to myself.

Whack!

When the cable made contact with the bottoms of my feet I let out a yell that must have been heard by everyone on the floor.

Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack!

It was like two sledgehammers were being brought down on the centers of both feet simultaneously, over and over again without mercy. The pain was somehow sharp and blunt at the same time, focused and all consuming. With my hands cuffed behind my back, and my legs restrained the way they were, I felt like a roped calf in a rodeo.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

There was nothing I could do but try to bury my face into the concrete floor, that and scream at the top of my lungs.

“God help me! God help me,” I yelled over and over in English— and, in Arabic, “I’m just a photographer!” Through the pain, I focused my thoughts on watching my language in order to keep from earning more licks, and calling on God in an attempt to relate to them. My pleading changed nothing, of course, and the suffering continued. They took turns whacking me in sets, passing the cable around like I was a piñata. About halfway through they stopped so that one of them could empty a bottle of water onto my feet to enhance the pain.

When they finally reached 115, I heard the Buddha Man instruct them to stop. A second later I was flipped over and the tire was removed. Pretending to be barely conscious, I was hoisted up from under my arms by two men, but as

soon as I tried to put any weight on my feet my knees buckled. If it hadn't been for the thugs holding me I would have dropped to the floor like a tree struck by lightning. My feet were throbbing with a constant heartbeat but were completely numb; it felt like they didn't even exist anymore and I was trying to balance myself on stumps. The two men supported me back to my cell while a few more followed behind. My feet just dragged along the ground. At the door to my cell, one of my escorts looked me deep in the eyes and said something to me in Arabic that Theo would translate later.

"Have you heard of Guantanamo Bay?" he asked.

A moment later I was softly placed on the floor and my handcuffs, very gently, were removed. I lay on my side with my eyes closed, feigning unconsciousness, feeling my heart slow, the cool ground against me. The men left.

At that moment, I thought our punishment had ended. Really, it had only just begun.

Maybe a half hour after being returned to the cell the door was opened by one of the guards. To our dismay, he was not there to give us back our beds.

"*Yala*," he said.

As soon as I stood up, pain shot through my feet, but this time there was no one to carry me so I took it and limped out into the hallway with my cap pulled over my eyes. The guard stepped behind me and tied a ribbon around the hat to secure it tightly, although I could still see slightly from the bottom. A man I did not know led me slowly up the stairs, and then I was outside and breathing fresh air for the first time in thirty-seven days. It was raining hard as I was led hobbling barefoot toward an SUV. I was placed on my knees on the wet ground. A jihadi came up from behind me and I heard him slide the action of his AK back as if they were going to execute me on the spot. I didn't say a word and held my chin high, waiting for the end; not wanting to give them the satisfaction of begging. A second later someone twisted my arm until I let out a horrific scream. Then I was up again, and placed in the trunk space of the SUV where another prisoner was awaiting me.

"Is that you? Is that you?" I heard Theo whisper.

"Yeah," I whispered back.

We were laid head to toe with our hands cuffed in front, my handcuffs

fastened through Theo's and a vinyl cover pulled over both of us. As soon as the trunk closed I lifted my cap and saw that there were air holes poked in the vinyl. Theo lifted his blindfold too, but as soon as we heard someone get in the front we covered up again. We lay there for a while, waiting to see what they had in store for us next. There were three possibilities running through my head. Either they were going to kill us, they were taking us to some kind of torture expert, or they were going to drive around in circles, maybe do a mock execution to scare us, and have us right back in our cell by the evening prayer, just to show us what would happen if we ever tried to escape again.

More men piled into the SUV, and we started moving. Some crazy jihadi song came blasting from the speakers—it began with the terrifying neighing of a horse and the sounds of hooves clapping on a hard surface. The song was a favorite, almost like an anthem; it got them all amped up and we could hear General Mohammad singing along. Their adrenaline was flowing, which couldn't be good for us. I grabbed Theo's hand and gave it a squeeze, kind of a combined *let's do this* and *if this is the end, it was nice knowing you*. The car bumped along the road.

We didn't know it yet, but we were heading straight toward hell.

THE ELECTRICAL INSTITUTE

FEBRUARY 6, 2013

It was about an hour's drive to the dark side of hell. It was located northeast of Aleppo, in an electrical institute abandoned after God knows how many battles by the regime. Unbeknownst to me, we were in Hraytan—the same town in which I'd stayed during most of my eighteen days in Syria. When we finally stopped, the rain was still falling hard. My back and head were killing me. Every time the SUV hit a bump I'd cracked my head on the side of the trunk, and my lower spine felt like someone was drilling into it. The men got out of the car and Theo and I lay there for a while longer, listening to them talking and joking before they opened the trunk and took us out. We were still barefoot, and as soon as my battered feet hit the pavement pain shot through them. A second later someone dropped a pair of orange rubber slippers at my feet and nudged me to put them on. The slippers were the kind with textured, grippy insoles; I stepped into them and onto what felt like hundreds of rubber spikes digging into raw flesh. I was led inside a building and down a staircase.

We were in a basement; everything I could see from beneath my cap was concrete, except for the door, which was steel and painted gray. Inside, I was set down on a blanket, and as soon as my escort left I lifted my cap. I was alone in this huge, empty cell. The ceilings had to be twenty feet high. All the windows were broken, and thick shards of glass littered the floor. After a few seconds I heard footsteps and covered my eyes again before the door opened. Theo was placed next to me and we were instructed to remove our blindfolds. Kneeling before us was Jamal, General Mohammad's right-hand man.

"Don't look at the windows," Theo translated as Jamal spoke to us in Arabic. "He said if we look at the windows we'll be shot."

"Ask him if we're goin' back to the other jail," I said.

Theo asked.

"*La*," said Jamal. He left.

We sat there absorbing our new surroundings. We didn't know what to think:

Were we brought here for punishment or for death? It was freezing in the room and there were only two blankets spread out about twenty feet apart. Theo was shivering in his wet pants and underwear—he said they’d gotten soaked when the jihadis poured water on his feet midtorture, and I didn’t press the issue. We needed blankets and we needed them fast.

It didn’t take long for Mohammad to pay us a visit, accompanied by what must have been about ten masked men. We hadn’t moved an inch because neither one of us wanted to walk on our ruined feet. He approached us wearing a giant smile with his arms extended, like he was the Dalai Lama.

“Jumu’*ahhhh!*” he said.

“Hey, General,” I responded. “So, what’s goin’ on here?”

He knelt beside me and made the same twisting hand motion he’d used when fitting the broken piece of concrete into the gouge in the door.

“You try to make hole?” he said, making a circle with his fingers and holding it up to his eye as if he were looking through a peephole.

“That was already there, man. I swear,” I said.

He said something in Arabic, his tone suddenly serious. His smile was completely gone and the expression that remained was unsettling. I didn’t understand a word until the very end, when I heard him say “*Israel.*”

Oh shit! I thought. Did he know?

After this, Mohammad stood and headed for the door, entourage in tow. The last kid to leave, Thug Life, had obviously missed his calling in theater, walking backward toward the door with a hand on his sheathed knife the whole time, never taking his eyes off us. Once Thug Life was out the door it was shut and locked.

“What’d Mohammad say?” I asked Theo immediately.

“He called you a Jew.”

This made what was already a worst-case scenario impossibly worse. Had he known the whole time? Were they saving me for some kind of public execution? I told myself that chances were he was just trying to insult me. Theo agreed.

Half an hour later we had two armed visitors. One was a young guard and the other a tall man of about thirty, wearing an army-green jumpsuit with “Qatar” stitched on the breast. He welcomed us to his house, calling us guests. They had brought us each three blankets, but when the older one asked if there was anything else we needed, Theo requested more. The man just laughed and left the room, with the guard behind him. Three sentries were stationed outside our

door, and every time it opened they stood at the entrance, staring at us while smiling and dragging their fingers across their throats.

Once the door was locked we got up and hobbled over to the other blanket, spread on the floor against the wall, to make our bed. It was so cold we'd decided to sleep side by side on two blankets and then stack the rest on top of us.

"I'm freezing," said Theo. "I have to take off my underwear or I'm gonna get sick."

I turned around so he could take them off. His underwear was repugnant; all discolored and stained. After he put his pants back on, he crawled under the covers next to me.

"All right, I guess we can use body heat to raise your temperature," I said, turning on my side so that my back was to him. "Here, put your arm around me."

"Okay, thanks."

"Yeah, well this is supposed to be done naked, but that shit ain't happenin', so—"

Theo laughed and I laughed along with him. It was weird, how close we suddenly were, hating each other yet knowing that we were all we had—and that there was a very good chance we would die together like this one day.

We called our new cell the Room of Broken Glass, and I know it's hard to believe, but we were both actually pleased with our new surroundings. The room was huge and full of light. The broken windows were too high to reach, but through them we could see a grassy hill and even a tree. Once we warmed up under the blankets we were much more comfortable than we'd ever been at the hospital.

Aside from the glass and the blankets, the only other thing in the room was a sheet of paper on the floor. I hobbled over to it and then handed it to Theo to read since it was all in Arabic.

"It says the Hraytan Police Station as the first number," said Theo, examining it.

That was how we found out where we were.

After Theo warmed up we split the blankets in half. A couple of guards entered with a piece of bread for each of us, and a little later someone brought a small container filled with halawa. We ate in small pinches with the bread to conserve what we had in case they didn't plan on feeding us again later. Soon

day turned into night and we were in the darkness again. The clatter of the guards outside our door rarely ceased. It was apparent that we were considered a serious flight risk—and that our captors were doing everything in their power to keep us grounded.

It was late when we got our first nightly visit. The door opened and flashlights illuminated the cell as footsteps approached us. We were instructed to stare at the wall so that's exactly what we did, while lying flat with our chins to the floor. I didn't recognize the voice of the man giving orders but as he and Theo went back and forth in Arabic it was clear they knew each other. Within seconds he was standing over Theo, pulling the blankets down from his back.

Oh no, I thought. Here it comes.

Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash!

He brought a cord down on Theo's back about five times, every one of them producing a scream that echoed throughout the room. Then he moved on to me. I stared at the wall as I felt the covers pulled down, bracing myself for what was coming.

Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash!

My screams were no louder than Theo's and no more effective in securing any mercy. I took my five lashes to the back and then, his job completed, our host left the room.

"Who was that guy?" I asked.

"That was Igor."

Theo had told me about Igor. Igor had been in charge of taking care of him at the hospital for the first few months, the way Yassine was with me. In Theo's stories Igor had always been nice, bringing him soda, tea, and even takeout, but here it seemed he only gave out ass whippings. In the morning, when I removed my clothes to perform my daily critter check, I'd find dried blood speckled across the back of my tee shirt. Igor's lashes had broken the skin and I hadn't even noticed.

The next day the door opened and Mohammad entered by himself. His sweatshirt bulged over the suicide belt he was rarely without these days.

"How you doin', General?" I asked, extending my hand.

"*Hamdullah*," he answered, accepting it.

A pause followed while he stared at me as if I were a puzzle he was trying to solve.

“Jumu’ah, who sent you to Syria?” he asked finally.

I just dropped my head and shook it.

“Mohammad, I was invited here,” I said. “You know that.”

“No, Jumu’ah. Maybe you be in Syria a long time, or maybe I just kill you.”

Then he turned and left the room, without another word.

Igor returned to whip us the next few nights to show us how things were done in his house, but Mohammad kept his distance. During the day, jihadis would kneel down outside our windows to peer in, asking us who we were and what we were doing there. One of them, a guy in his midtwenties, seemed genuinely interested in us. After we’d met he appeared at our door late that night with one of the guards and gave us a small bowl filled with pasta. We’d rarely gotten a hot meal at the hospital, so this was a treat. The name I chose for our benefactor was Bubbles: it seemed to fit his chubby, big-eared appearance and friendly nature. However, Bubbles turned out not to be as bubbly on the inside as he was on the outside.

Bubbles was mostly interested in getting me to confess to being CIA. The next time I saw him he showed up with his sidekick, a kid of about nineteen who just looked evil, with spiky eyebrows and an expression of stone. I decided to name him Sancho, after literature’s most famous sidekick, and after shaking Bubbles’s hand I extended mine to Sancho. He left me hanging and stared at me in disgust. Theo translated as Bubbles spoke to me in Arabic. He told me to choose my words carefully and to be honest. I nodded. The first question he asked was if I spoke Arabic.

“No,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Sancho asked, in English. I said I was.

“Are you CIA?” asked Bubbles through Theo.

“No,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Sancho asked again.

It was obvious that they didn’t believe me, and after a few more minutes of this they left the room, visibly frustrated. Between this visit and the last one from Mohammad, it was clear that my identity was now in question in a way it hadn’t been before—and that I had a serious problem.

Later that night, a gunshot rang out just outside our door.

On our fourth night in the room, the door opened and Fenster entered holding a

flashlight. He ordered us to pick up our covers and follow him. We kept tripping over the blankets and each other on our way up the stairs, so he gave us permission to uncover our eyes. When we exited the building I stopped in awe at the sight before me.

We were in what felt like an abandoned city. All around us were these huge battered buildings, with broken windows and no signs of life at all: no lights, no voices, no gunshots; only desolation. After taking it all in I turned to Fenster, who was giving me a confident boast of a look that said, *Yeah, this is ours*. Standing behind him in the distance was a circular concrete tower about sixty feet tall. In the second or two before we started moving again I studied it well. I always kept my eye out for landmarks in case I ever got out of Syria alive; the tower looked like something I could locate on a satellite view.

Once we'd cleared the building, Fenster told us to cover our eyes and keep walking. Theo kept losing his grip and dropping his blankets, which slowed us down and pissed off Fenster. We approached a building and another guard headed toward us holding a flashlight. As we entered, I paid close attention through the bottom of my cap. There were no guards stationed by the wide open doors and the entire first floor seemed to be vacant. We were led to a staircase and for once told to go up instead of down. On the second floor we were marched up the hall; we heard the voices of militants coming from within the rooms we passed. Fenster opened a wooden door and told us to get inside. When we did, he immediately slammed the door and locked it. We were in a tiny, freezing room, engulfed in blackness.

"This is not good," said Theo.

"No shit!" I replied.

What we saw in the few seconds before the door was shut didn't make us feel any better. There was a window, but it had been concreted over. There was a light, but it had been ripped out. It was colder than the Room of Broken Glass, colder than anywhere we had been kept so far, and there was dust and dirt all over the floor where we had to sleep. Theo was clearly in distress so I took control of the situation and spread out our blankets to make a bed; we crawled under the remaining ones together to keep from getting sick. The room seemed custom-made for suffering, with no ventilation or illumination at all, except for what filtered through the thin crack beneath the door.

It's hard to imagine what one could have done to deserve being locked in a dark

room. I wondered, was it something I did in the past? Or maybe something I should have done and didn't? Mostly, though, I just wondered how long they were going to keep us here.

It was in this place, in the endless cold darkness, that I finally let myself cry. I don't think Theo noticed because he'd started spending pretty much all day and night under the covers, which honestly was one of the things dragging my morale down the most. General Mohammad had taken me from a cell packed with soldiers who had become my friends and placed me with this guy specifically so I'd have someone to talk to—and now all he did was cower under his blankets, lying there as if he were already dead. He rarely spoke, or even moved. Some days I hated him more than ever because if it weren't for him I'd still be with the POWs or alone, either of which seemed better than watching someone else silently lose his mind and his humanity. I needed a brother, someone to support me as I supported him. Instead I got Theo.

When we did talk, it was mostly about the past. I remember telling him all about my youth, specifically how insecure I was, always trying to display an air of swaggering confidence I didn't feel. He responded by telling me he'd gotten into a lot of fights in high school, where he'd been a tough guy with a reputation for violence. I didn't believe it for a second and wasn't sure why he'd bother to lie—probably because he wanted me to beware of some hidden beast within.

“So what are your books about?” I asked him one day.

His first was about the students he'd taught at a jail in Vermont, kids who'd been convicted of some pretty serious crimes. It was a one-time thing for him, teaching in a jail, but it gave him enough material for a manuscript. He told me he got a quarter-million-dollar advance, but the book wasn't a success.

His second book was called *A Journey into Yemen*, but when I asked him to describe it he was vague, saying just that it was a history of the country with some “brief discussion” of extremism. Much later I'd find out that the full title was *Undercover Muslim: A Journey into Yemen*, starring Theo as the “Undercover Muslim.” The book was meant to be an exposé—he moved to Yemen in 2005 and feigned conversion to Islam in order to deceive the locals and gain access to the incredibly secretive mosques and madrasas. This was an act of heresy so severe it would mean an immediate death sentence if it were ever discovered, which is why he went by two different names—he'd had to change his name after the book's publication, for his own safety. I was unknowingly locked in a cell with someone who had disrespected the religion of

our captors so blatantly and publicly that if they ever found out who he really was, he'd wish he were only a CIA agent, and things definitely wouldn't improve for me, either.

The guards on the floor were all in their late teens and early twenties and seemed to be running the place with no adult supervision. The one thing I had to be grateful for was the fact that Yassine had been transferred to the new building with us. He still encouraged the guards to abuse Theo, but he always protected me from them, and never raised a hand to me himself.

Bathroom trips were a nightmare, with all the punks coming out of the woodwork to jeer at us and whip our elbows and the backs of our knees as we walked the hallway like a gauntlet. Occasionally I took a lash to the head from Sancho. Past the staircase the jihadis had spread sheets over the ground, but when we got there they'd kick them aside and make us continue on the dirty floor as if we weren't good enough to walk on them. As we passed one of the rooms they slept and hung out in, I noticed a number on the door and beds inside. The place looked like it had been a dormitory before the war.

The bathroom was all white with a high window through which we could see a patch of sky. There was one squat toilet stall and two showers. While we were in there the jihadis would gather by the door to hurl insults and laugh at us. One time, a kid I had never seen before and never saw again gave me a lesson on Islam while I was standing there waiting my turn. He couldn't have been more than sixteen.

"You're going to hell!" he said fiercely, eyes glittering. "You're not a Muslim! You're going to hell! You're all going to hell! Your *mother* is going to hell!"

As Theo translated, I just stood there looking at this mindless little turd, fascinated. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that I was going to hell, when here I thought I was already there. He would have been happy to kill us. That passion and intensity of belief in someone so young was a frightening thing, because these are the kids who can be talked into blowing themselves up, or flying planes into buildings.

The water was often out at this point, so it wasn't uncommon to enter the stall to find the hole in the ground completely filled with the shit of what looked like twenty men, making it impossible to empty our piss bottles there. This also meant there was no way for us to clean ourselves up after using the toilet, and

one time I had to go bad.

“Yassine, please, man, give us a pail of water,” I begged.

“No,” he answered sternly, “there is no water.”

I put my hands to the sides of my head in frustration. “Come on, Yassine!”

“All right, one second.”

He left the bathroom and returned a few seconds later with three tissues—two for me and one for Theo.

I rarely got much time to relieve myself because Yassine and the boys would usually start beating on Theo as soon as I was in the stall, and his screams forced me to hurry as much as possible in order to get him inside. I’d often emerge to find him already on the wet, filthy floor, screaming “Please, please, please!” in Arabic with one arm raised above his head. They kept a special cable in the bathroom just for him, thick and black like the one they did my feet with.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Both the blows and Theo’s screams were especially loud this day.

“All right, I’m almost done!” I yelled, pulling up my pants.

When I stepped out Theo was on the ground and Dingleberry, who got his name because he was a little shit, was standing over him with the cable and a big smile, Yassine egging him on from the sidelines. While I was in the stall they’d managed to thrash Theo’s arm and hand badly enough that they’d knocked off one of his fingernails. I’d told him a hundred times to stop falling on his back right away like he did and to stand and take it instead, because they bring that cable down with a lot more force than when they lash it sideways, but either he didn’t listen or he just couldn’t help it.

“Go on, man, go,” I said, and Theo got up and into the stall. “So Yassine, you kill Bashar yet?”

“No, not yet, but I will,” he answered, smiling.

“Yeah, no doubt. Can I photograph it?”

“Yes.”

“All right!”

It was Yassine and conversations like this that got me through the bathroom trips mostly unharmed. Unfortunately, sometimes Bubbles was there instead, and Bubbles was dead set on breaking me, to be the hero who got my confession. One day when I came out of the stall I found Bubbles hitting Theo with a thin piece of wood that looked like molding for a door while the usual punks gathered around and laughed. He moved from hitting him on the arm to his back,

and Theo fell to the ground like always, one hand raised in submission.

Now Bubbles turned to me. Theo translated without getting up.

“Admit that you are a CIA agent,” Bubbles demanded.

“*La*,” I said.

“Turn around and face the wall,” he ordered. I did. “Now, speak Arabic.”

To appease him I began spitting out what little Arabic I knew, but I did this in the most condescending tone possible, thinking he wouldn’t pick up on it. But Bubbles immediately cut me off, yelling:

“Tell him to talk normal!”

I continued, this time in my regular voice, until I felt a slight tug on my vest.

“He wants you to take it off,” said Theo.

I removed the vest. Then he tugged on my hoodie and I removed that too. Now I stood in the white sleeveless tee shirt Yassine had given me—with part of my shoulder tattoo visible. Not only are tattoos in general a sin in Islam, I knew that this one in particular could cause me considerable problems. It was a picture of Leo Tolstoy as an old man, with a long gray beard that made him look Hasidic. Aside from the “Jewishness” of the figure, the fact that Russia was supplying the regime with the bulk of their weapons meant that I had no desire to explain who the guy was. For this reason I had worked hard to keep Leo totally concealed—and I had, until now. Bubbles noticed the tattoo immediately and pulled my shirt aside to expose the rest of it.

“He wants to know who that is,” Theo translated.

“It looks like a Jew,” said one of the guards.

“Tell him it’s just an old man I picked off the wall in the tattoo parlor,” I said.

“Tell him it’s a wizard.”

Theo translated but Bubbles was less than convinced, so we settled on Walt Whitman. Then Bubbles tugged on my tee shirt. I took it off and stood there in the freezing cold, exposed in front of everyone, keeping myself turned to the wall to conceal my other tattoo.

“He says this is your last chance to confess,” said Theo. “Just do it.”

“And be treated like this?” I asked, turning slightly and motioning to him where he still lay, cowering on the floor.

I looked Bubbles right in the eye.

“No!” I said defiantly, in English.

Bubbles instructed one of the guards to return Theo to our cell so he could tend to me alone. Once it was just the two of us he wasted no time in getting to

work.

Lash!

I screamed as a strip of garden hose landed on my back.

Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash! Lash!

The bathroom was an echo chamber and my screams must have reached every corner of the building. And then, as suddenly as he'd begun, Bubbles stopped. I don't know if he saw that I wasn't going to break or he just didn't want to get in trouble with management for inflicting too much damage upon me, but something made him think twice about continuing, and as I stood waiting for another blow he abruptly reached around me and pulled my shirt from where it rested on the radiator. I looked at him and he nodded for me to get dressed. I didn't hesitate. Sancho appeared to grab me by the arm and lead me back to the cell, where Theo was sitting on the blankets. Sancho ordered me to get on my knees and place my head to the wall, then with his thick cable dealt me a blow to the elbow that made me shriek at the top of my lungs. He left; the door slammed behind him.

At that point I was still determined never to admit I was a spy under any circumstances, if only to avoid being placed in the same category as Theo, who'd "confessed" after one lash to the feet and was now the prisoner on which every jihadi vented his hatred. Mine was a good strategy, but it would not stand the tests of time and torture.

Sometimes we'd go long stretches without being taken to the bathroom—the record was two and a half days. Since we had our piss bottles and were hardly being fed, most of the time this wasn't really a problem. Other times it was. We had a bucket, but at this point I still refused to take a dump in it, just on principle.

"Don't knock on the door," Theo would warn me.

"No, fuck that!" I'd yell back. "I'm knocking!"

The rules in this prison were different than the last: we weren't allowed to knock on the door; if we did, we were told, we would be punished. This threat wasn't enough to deter me when I really had to go, and so when the time came, I knocked and yelled the same phrase over and over, figuring I was bound to annoy them into taking me to relieve myself, eventually.

"Bathroom, please, bathroom!" I bellowed, pounding on the door.

I would do this for as long as it took—and sometimes it took hours.

Usually, that was the end of it: I got to shit in a toilet like a human being, and despite their threats, no one was punished—a win-win. However, on other occasions we got a different reaction:

“Who knock door?” we heard Sancho scream once as he marched toward our cell.

“Oh shit, it’s Sancho,” said Theo, trembling.

“I did!” I yelled, knocking some more.

A second later the door opened and standing before me was a vexed Sancho, holding a thick rope. Yassine was with him.

“Who knock door?” Yassine asked me, enraged.

“I did,” I said.

We stared into each other’s eyes for a second, and then Yassine abruptly turned his attention toward Theo, ran over to him, and began beating the shit out of him. Sancho joined in, bringing the rope down on Theo’s back again and again as Yassine kicked him and yelled about the knocking. I tried to stop them, but my attempts were futile.

“Yassine, wait!” I said pleadingly. “It was me! I knocked!”

It didn’t matter. They got in a few last shots and then Yassine turned to me, jabbing his finger at my chest.

“Don’t knock on the door!” he said, and as they left, he slammed it behind them.

I stood there, guilty and untouched, as Theo moaned on the floor.

“Oh shit, dude, you okay?”

“No!” Theo yelled. “Don’t knock on the door!”

I told him I wouldn’t, but I knew that this was a lie. If I really had to go or was painfully hungry, I would be back at that door. Maybe that seems hard to understand, but I had drawn a line. In my mind I was a human being, and human beings do not shit in buckets. We cry two tears in them.

Starvation: I had read about it, but the reality was worse than I had imagined—it wasn’t just the hunger, it was being so completely at the mercy of others. We were usually fed once a day, but there was no guarantee we would be. Most days it was a piece of bread for each of us and a small cup of yogurt, or a bit of halawa on a saucer for us to share. We rarely saw food arrive before *Asr*, the third prayer of the day, which took place in the late afternoon. Sometimes it would come even later, long after *Isha* in the late evening. When Yassine

delivered our meals I could usually get an extra piece of bread out of him for me and Theo to split. I tried to eat as little of the bread as possible to save it for the next day. It was tough waking up hungry, just lying there listening for the call to prayer, and hoping to be fed. At times while on bathroom runs I would beg Yassine to feed us that night.

“Please, don’t starve us,” I said. “Feed us, Yassine. Please, feed us.”

“You will eat well tonight, *Inshallah*,” he would always answer, but he rarely delivered on that promise.

Once in a while we got a warm meal, which Yassine served to us as if he were doing us a favor—a little plastic bucket with rice and other leftovers dumped in it. Theo and I would pass the bucket back and forth, taking turns pinching up mouthfuls with our bread. I don’t think we were ever full once, not the entire time we were there.

Nights when they hadn’t fed us during the day were the most painful and seemed to last forever. By then any bread we had saved would be long gone. I would lie there with barely enough energy to move, alert to every footstep I heard, hoping it was someone coming to feed us, their pets. Most of the time the footsteps just walked right past our door. I would babble during these times. I don’t remember what I talked about but it drove Theo crazy, and if he said something I didn’t like or agree with, I’d practically bite his head off. It’s horrible, waiting to be fed. It makes you feel like an abused dog, stuffed into a crate and forgotten. Sometimes they never came at all.

We’d been in the darkness for a few days when the emir came to check on us, accompanied by a bunch of the guards. The door was open and the hallway was illuminated—the electricity was on. We were given permission to turn from the wall and face him.

“How are you?” asked the emir.

“We’re hungry,” I said.

He immediately told one of the punks to get us food and he ran off to do as he was told. The emir then started speaking in Arabic, pointing all over the room. He told the guards to cut a hole in the wall above the door for ventilation—the walls were covered with a layer of moisture that made them impossible to lean against—and to give us a light because he didn’t want us to get sick. Both of these things were done the next day, the guards stringing a wire from where the fixture used to be in the ceiling, with a bulb dangling at the end. The emir

also instructed Yassine to give us a bath and scissors to cut our beards, which had grown considerably long, mine dark brown with a silver stripe up the chin.

The hole above the door did little to help with the condensation problem, but it was a great source of light. A natural steel-colored glow burst through it, making it possible during the day to see across the cell. As usual, light made everything a little better for me, but Theo continued to stay under the covers as if it were some kind of sanctuary. Unfortunately, the hole also created a new problem, letting in giant mosquitoes and adding to the number of creatures feasting on our blood. It was so cold we were always under the blankets and barely had any exposed skin for them to land on, but at night as we tried to sleep they'd harass us by flying around our heads, that buzzing sound enough to drive anyone mad. Whenever the light went on, the first thing I'd do was search the walls and ceilings for those vampires and kill them where they sat—but, just like the jihadis, there were always more to take their place.

We weren't the only prisoners in the building—once I thought I heard the voices of some of the POWs I'd been kept with at the hospital coming from the cell across from ours, but I couldn't be sure. There were new people all the time, mostly guards we had never seen before. It was obvious that we'd been singled out for extra abuse. Some days they would blast loud music right outside our door for hours on end, just to drive us crazy—and it usually worked. It was so loud I pictured giant six-foot-tall wall speakers on wheels.

Outside our doors it was like some kind of postapocalyptic scenario where only the youth had survived and so had inherited the Earth. One night they had an indoor soccer game in the hallway outside our cell. As they kicked the ball back and forth, laughing and shouting, it was obvious they were having the time of their lives.

“This is insane,” I said. “This is the worst time of our lives and the best time of theirs, right?”

“Yeah,” answered Theo. “It's *Lord of the Flies* out there.”

And he was right. It was *Lord of the Flies*, only instead of being armed with spears and bows, they had AK-47s and RPGs. The more time that went by, the more I hoped they would just kill me already. Between the cold, the dark, the mosquitoes, and Theo, this place was truly hell, and that's exactly what we came to call it.

One night when the electricity was out, we heard a crowd of militants gathering outside our door. Flashlights shone from beneath it and lit the keyhole. We didn't recognize any of the voices, and concluded from the tone that they were mostly management. After a few minutes of talk we heard the door to the cell across from ours open, the same door that I suspected held the POWs. Someone was removed before the door was closed again. Within a minute we heard the screaming.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"This is so much worse than the hospital," said Theo.

Whatever they were doing to this prisoner, it was being done in the hallway, practically right outside our door. His cries sounded like the screeching of a cat, and they echoed, bouncing from wall to wall like a laser in a room full of mirrors. All the while the guards were interrogating him: Theo heard them ask about the location of a certain general, but couldn't make out much of anything else.

Once they were done with this prisoner they moved on to another, and then two more after him. They all screamed like hell except for one, who took it and barely made a sound. It was a good twenty minutes before they returned the last prisoner to the cell and locked it without removing another. Then they turned their attention toward us; I saw the blue ray of a flashlight beam straight through our keyhole.

"Oh shit, they're comin'!" I said, turning on my stomach and facing the wall with the covers pulled over my shoulders.

The key slipped into the lock and turned. Our door opened and we heard several men standing in the entrance, having a short conversation. The first half ended in a word I knew: "*moswer*," "photographer"—they were talking about me. The second part also ended in something I recognized: "*CIA*," which meant they were talking about Theo.

"*C-I-A, yala!*" one of them yelled at Theo; he got up and was taken from the room without uttering a word.

The door was locked and I was once again in the position of waiting for my turn to be tortured. I didn't move, just locked my hands together and started praying out loud as hard as I could, over and over.

"Please God, don't let them hurt him too bad and protect me! Please God, don't let them hurt him too bad and protect me!"

I heard them talking to Theo, but all he said back was, "No, wait! Please,

please, please!”

Then his words transformed into screams. Within seconds of the first blow Theo capitulated and told them what they wanted to hear.

“Okay, CIA! CIA! CIA!” he cried out.

As soon as he did this the beating stopped. They loved showing off their CIA agent to visitors. I knew my time was coming, so I prayed even harder.

“Please God, protect me and keep me safe! Please God, protect me and keep me safe!”

The door opened and Theo was thrown violently into the room, landing directly on my leg and causing me to let out an involuntary scream. My turn—but our jailors had different ideas; they slammed the door and locked it. I had been spared.

As soon as the door closed Theo leaned his head on my shoulder, panting uncontrollably.

“You okay, man?” I asked him.

“Yeah, yeah, just don’t move!” he answered. “Don’t move!”

“Ohh-kay.”

So I lay still, as he leaned and breathed on me like a dog. After a few minutes it kind of got uncomfortable.

“Are you all right, man? You want me to rub your feet?” I asked seriously.

Theo let out a laugh, not realizing I meant it.

“No, that’s okay,” he said.

“They give you the tire?”

“No, no, they didn’t have one, so they threw a rope over the pipe and strung me up by my feet and hit me like that.”

Even right on the other side of the door I could not picture what that must have been like—strung up like a pig in the dark, with only the blue rays of the flashlights swirling around the hall. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my life, and nothing had even happened to me.

Now that we had a light, we could disrobe and hunt for bedbugs again. Even when it worked, which was rarely, the light was dim due to lack of power, so I picked through my clothes sitting directly under the bulb, at the foot of our bed. I removed the label from the Pepsi bottle I pissed in, folded it in half, and crushed the bugs inside it to keep my blood and the insects contained. Needless to say,

after being in the dark for a while I was crawling with them.

“I guess I’ll look too,” said Theo. “It kills time.”

Theo unzipped his jacket.

“Holy shit!” I said in shock.

What I saw was something not even James Cameron could have made up. His entire shirt was covered with bugs, like something straight out of a science fiction movie. Theo froze, wide-eyed, looking down at his colonized shirt.

“Yo, what’s that on your shoulder?” I asked.

He shifted his attention to his shoulder, where sat the biggest bedbug in the history of man.

“It’s just a piece of fuzz,” Theo said.

“Illlll, man, no way! It’s moving! It’s alive!”

Theo peeled off his shirt, and I noticed that his skin was infected. He had sores, red bite marks, and deep scratches from his nails all over his torso. He looked like a leper. I couldn’t believe I had to share a bed with this guy. There must have been a thousand parasites crawling on that shirt, and I could only imagine how many of the ones on me came from him.

“I told you to look before, but no!” I fumed. “You didn’t have any!”

“I didn’t! These are from these blankets.”

“Yeah, whatever, keep tellin’ yourself that.”

When Theo picked the bugs from his clothes he placed them on the floor next to our bed and crushed them with a fingertip. This I did not like. I found it disgusting and in violation of my personal hygiene standards.

“Don’t do that!” I told him, over and over again.

“Okay, okay,” he’d say, without looking at me. He’d crush the next couple underneath our bottom blanket, like I’d asked him to, but he always returned to killing and leaving them on the open ground.

One day, after I’d watched him kill about twenty bugs this way, he got up, took a piss, and then walked back to our bed, stepping in the blood and the guts of the bugs he’d just killed along the way. It was not the first time I’d seen him do this, but it was the last.

“What the fuck did I tell you about walking in the blood and trackin’ it and the dead bodies onto our bed?” I asked, as he sat back down.

“You know what? Shut up!” said Theo. “I’ll do what I want. I don’t have to listen to you!”

“Oh really?” I asked.

A second passed as we stared each other down, and then I spontaneously punched him in the face.

“Ooooh, you fucking terrorist!” he yelled, rocking back and forth, as enraged as I’d seen him. “You’re just like them! You fucking terrorist!”

This provoked a reaction from me, considering all that I had done for him in the way of procuring extra food, blankets, and baths, so I jumped to my feet, grabbed him around the throat, and pinned him to the wall.

“I’m a *terrorist*?” I asked. “If I were a terrorist I’d steal your bread. If I were a terrorist I’d steal your blankets. Now don’t fuckin’ crush any more of those bugs where you walk! Do you understand me?”

“Yes! Yes! Just get off me!”

I let him go. I’m not proud of this outburst, but I was bent on keeping my humanity intact, no matter what—on not becoming the animal they were treating me as. I refused to let anyone drag me any lower.

It was around this time that I started trying to talk Theo into another escape attempt.

“We gotta get outta here or they’re gonna kill us,” I said, trying to motivate him, “or else just leave us here to rot.”

“I know.”

“We have to try and escape again. If only I could get a hanger or something to pick that lock.” To my surprise, Theo didn’t argue.

As we discussed our options it became clear that we didn’t really have any, but this didn’t deter me. We were thinking as one, and for just a few moments we had the bond that we should have had all along. Through the dimness of the cell I looked deep into Theo’s eyes and he stared back. We locked hands like brothers and made a pact that no two people should ever have to make.

“Either we escape together, or we die together,” I said.

“Yeah,” Theo agreed, and he squeezed my hand.

As time went by only one viable possibility presented itself. Almost every time the door opened, there was more than one person on the other side of it—one with the food and the other with a gun—but once in a while Yassine would pay us a solo visit for a late-night feeding. My plan was simple: I get up to give Yassine a fist bump and as soon as he raises his hand I grab it and pull him into the room, slapping on a choke hold until he is good and dead. When they moved us to this building I’d seen how quiet the complex was at night; I was confident

that if we could just get outside we would make it out alive. Theo, of course, was against it. He said he didn't want to kill anybody, even Yassine, who beat him practically every day. Since he'd already admitted he'd kill me for freedom, this kind of pissed me off, because it proved that his refusal wasn't about taking a life; it was about fear of repercussions for the life he took.

"All you gotta do is cover his mouth if I don't slap the hold on him right away, and shut the door," I promised.

"No! If we kill one of them they'll put the word out to every checkpoint and we'll never make it out of the country alive. Then they'll really make us suffer." Like we were doing so great now.

"Come on, man, the FSA controls all the checkpoints to Turkey. These guys aren't that organized, although I agree they'd probably try."

"Forget it."

"Come on, we made a pact! Escape together or die together, right?"

"No, forget it. I changed my mind."

"What?"

"I'm not committing suicide with you," Theo snapped in a bitchy tone.

"Well, if we stay here that's exactly what we're doing. At least if they kill us during an escape attempt we go out like men instead of dying on our knees."

I kept talking, but it was useless. He was back under the covers, waiting to be killed or rescued, whichever happened to come first.

I couldn't stop staring at our keyhole. It was one of those old-fashioned ones, like for a skeleton key, big enough to look through. I knew that if I could just get my hands on a hanger or some other kind of wire I would be able to pick it. So I started thinking about where I might get wire and I remembered my first apartment, back in Amityville, New York: it had a small stall shower, with wire rings holding up the curtain. I'd never looked at the rings on the shower curtains here. Later, when Yassine took us to the bathroom, the first thing I did was scope out the rings, and I could not believe my eyes. They were exactly the same as the ones I remembered. The shower was by the toilets, just out of sight of where Yassine stood in the door with Theo a few feet away by the sinks, so right before I entered the stall I unfastened one of the rings and left it in place. I wanted to see if it would be noticed and refastened by our next visit.

When we got back to the room I told Theo my plan. Of course he was dead set against it, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. The only thing I needed now

was a good hiding spot, but this wasn't exactly easy to come by. Except for us, the blankets, a bucket, and the water and piss bottles, the cell was completely empty. I knew if they found contraband of any kind, our punishment would be even more severe than the last time. The lights were working, so I took a good long look around the room. The only spot that seemed logical was the hole in the ceiling where the wire from the lightbulb was fed. Naturally, in order to check it out I'd need to stand on Theo's shoulders.

"Come on, Theo, we can't just sit here like this until they kill us. We have to get out of here and if I get that ring back here we can do it."

"Because you have so much lock-picking experience, right?" he said sarcastically. "Why don't I stand on *your* shoulders for once?"

"Because I have a bad back. I told you this a hundred times!"

That was a lie. There was nothing wrong with my back. I just didn't want his filthy bedbug-cruste feet standing on my shoulders.

"Whatever, I'm not your butt boy."

For the next hour I focused on annoying the hell out of him until he agreed to get up and let me check out the hole.

"All right, if I lift you up will you shut up?" he said.

"Yes, I promise."

A few seconds later I was climbing up on his shoulders. To balance, I held on to the wall with one hand, and once up and turned around I was in reach of the hole, which was round and about the size of a poker chip. As I reached to put my finger through, it grazed the wire ever so lightly, and several sparks shot at my face like something out of a pyrotechnics display during a Metallica concert. Just after that, the room went black.

"Shit!" I said, getting down.

"Great!" said Theo. "I told you this was a bad idea!"

"I know, I know; you were right," I apologized. "I'm so sorry. Boost me back up. Maybe I can fix it."

"No, forget it!"

And I did. I was furious with myself. That light had been priceless to me. It protected me from the thoughts that would otherwise race through my mind in the darkness: *How long will I be in this room? Do they know I'm Jewish yet? Does anyone back home know where I am?* And the constant chorus: *What the fuck did I do to deserve getting locked in a room with a guy like this?*

Later, as I sat there staring at the light streaming in through the keyhole, I

imagined how I was going to pick the lock, step by step, and planned out what I'd do after the door was open. It had a calming effect on me, but it didn't last long.

Within three hours of unhooking the shower curtain ring the worst possible thing happened. It began with the sound of someone hammering nails into our door.

"No!" I said. "Don't tell me they're putting a padlock on there!"

The next time the door opened I saw a padlock affixed to it, about three-quarters of the way up. I couldn't believe our luck. As soon as I had something that gave me hope, they took it away. I was devastated. It felt as if God were looking down and singling us out for maximized suffering. A few hours before, I'd had light and a possible escape plan, and now both had been taken away, leaving me with nothing but darkness.

We were in the dark for seven straight days this time. The hole above the door helped some during the day or when the electricity was on at night, but that was a rare treat during this period. Fed late at night, we ate in the shadows and had to stay under the covers to keep warm; without utensils it was nearly impossible to avoid dropping food onto the bed we slept on, and then there was no way for us to clean it up. Theo was back to emerging from the covers only when it was time to eat, which didn't help my increasingly hopeless state of mind. Every time Yassine took us to the bathroom I begged him to fix the light, and every time he gave me the same answer:

"Yes, yes, Jumu'ah, I will fix it soon, *Inshallah*. I am very busy."

A few days in, we got a visit from the emir. When he gave us permission to turn from the wall and stand I did; Theo stayed seated.

"How are you?" he asked in Arabic.

I answered by motioning to the unlit bulb and then lifting my arms and raising my eyebrows in the universal gesture for *How do you think?* The emir raised his own brows, and when I told him, through Theo, how long we had been in the dark, his jaw dropped. He immediately ordered the punks with him to fix the light, and left. Within minutes a table had been dragged into the room and a guard was standing on it trying to fix the wiring while another lit his work with a flashlight. The bulb flickered, but didn't stay on, and after about five minutes they gave up and walked out of the room. They said they would come back in a few minutes, but never did, leaving us to rot.

Later that night the door opened. It was Bubbles, with a kid of around thirteen that we were pretty sure was his little brother. Bubbles was holding a small pistol—he'd brought the kid along to show him how American dogs were to be treated.

"Stand up and face the wall," he said to me in Arabic.

Theo translated and I did what I was told.

"You love Obama!" said the kid.

"Great, they're all watching that fuckin' video!" I mumbled to myself, thinking back to my first night with General Mohammad.

"Put your hands up," Bubbles ordered.

I did.

"Sit down."

I did.

"Stand up."

I stood up, never turning from the wall.

"Put your hands up."

Theo began to translate and Bubbles snapped something at him.

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He told me not to translate for you."

"Put your hands up," Bubbles said again in Arabic.

"I don't know what you're saying, man. What do you want me to do? Sit?" I said, about to hit the floor for a second time.

"No!" he yelled.

"Well, what? I don't know what you're saying!"

"One of you has to stand all night and one of you gets to sleep," said Bubbles calmly. "Which one will it be?"

This he let Theo translate.

"I'll stand," I said.

"Why?" asked Bubbles.

"Because someone's got to do it."

His kick connected with my lower spine and sent me crashing into the wall, face-first. Now Bubbles raised his pistol and told Theo to stand up and move over so that he wouldn't get blood splattered on him when he shot me. Theo didn't translate this at the time, but I could tell what he expected to happen from the fear in his eyes and the way he was shielding himself. I rolled my eyes at

him. I knew this tool didn't have the authority to shoot me. After a few seconds I was instructed to sit down again, and Bubbles asked Theo the same question about standing all night. A moment later the door closed.

"Wait, wait!" Theo cried out in Arabic.

"Shut up! Why the fuck are you callin' him back in here for?"

"I don't know if I have to stand all night," he answered.

"What?"

They came back and Theo asked his question. Bubbles gave me a look that said *Is this guy serious?* and shut the door again without giving him an answer. I was livid, and explained to my cellmate why it wasn't such a smart move to call someone who'd *just attempted to make me think he was going to execute me on the spot* back into the room after he'd finally decided to leave.

This wasn't the only time Bubbles did something like this. He would often open the door and point his pistol at my head to try and scare me. It never had the desired effect though.

"Go ahead, do it!" I'd say, looking him dead in the eye and pointing to the middle of my forehead. "Come on, do it! Put me out of my misery already."

"Stop doing that," Theo mumbled.

"Shut up!" I'd answer him.

"He's going to shoot you by accident."

"Good!"

I figured the thing these guys were proudest of was that they weren't afraid to die, so I might as well connect with them on that level, which by this time wasn't exactly a stretch. Eventually he got the point and just stopped doing it altogether.

On February sixteenth, the door opened and Yassine told me to get up. He handcuffed me and led me out of the room without my eyes covered for the first time since I'd arrived. As we walked I noticed the huge flag on the wall at the end of the hallway with "There is no God but Allah" and "Mohammad is the true prophet" written on it in Arabic—the black flag of Jabhat al-Nusra.

I was led to a door across from the staircase where the hall widened into what must have been a common area when this place was still a dorm. Now it was empty, except for an exercise bench and some free weights.

Waiting for us in the room were Chubs and Redbeard, two of the masked Canadians who'd taken my financial information back at the hospital. I've never

been so relieved to see two members of a terrorist organization. Maybe they had finished with their investigation and I was finally going home. Two guards came in to pay their respects to the visitors, and after they'd left Redbeard asked Yassine for a glass of tea, which he immediately went to fetch. Now we were alone, just the three of us, and I was offered a chair. I sat down and looked around the room. It was huge, and empty except for the chairs, a table, and explosive devices that sat on every windowsill.

"I'm going to take these off of you, okay?" said Redbeard, gesturing to my handcuffs. "If you try anything it will be bad."

He was wearing some kind of military vest loaded with all the tools one might need to wage war, and when he bent down his pistol fell out of the vest and onto the floor at my feet. Redbeard froze and looked up at me as if I might lunge for it, but after a second I guess he realized I wasn't that stupid and picked up the gun and took off my handcuffs. Now we were all settled.

"How are you?" asked Redbeard.

"How am I?" I answered. "They're beating us and starving us."

"They're beating you?" he asked, disgusted.

"Yeah, I got flogged with a garden hose. You want to see my back?"

"No."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little cookie about the size of an Oreo and gave it to me. I tore off the packaging like an animal and scarfed it down. Then Chubs handed me a small Kit Kat, the kind with two bars in it, and I put that in my pocket.

"Aren't you going to eat it?" asked Chubs.

"Yeah, I just wanna split it with the other guy," I said.

"We need the answers to some of the security questions for your credit cards," said Redbeard. "Make sure they are right. It took us an hour to get here and we don't want to have to come back."

Chubs then asked me some basic questions like what my first car had been, where I went to elementary school, and where I'd worked for my first job. I wrote the answers down in a little pink spiral notepad they'd brought, the sort that kids used to write their homework assignments in. After this they moved on to Theo.

"Do you think he's a CIA agent?" asked Redbeard.

"No way," I answered.

"How do you know?"

“Because the guy’s the biggest sweetheart I ever met in my life and he’s way too stupid.” In reality, he was the biggest douchebag I had ever met, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to have his back the best I could—he was an American and it was my obligation. Anyway, the second part of my explanation was true.

We discussed Theo for a few minutes more—what he’d told me about where he was from, what he did for a living, shit like that—and then I changed the subject to try to get a feel for how the war was going. They said that the opposition now controlled around 50 percent of Aleppo. When I’d arrived in country they’d controlled 85 percent, so this was bad news for them—the regime had made a major comeback. They then asked whether I was in a relationship with anyone back home, and I lied and said yes. I thought it might help to let them think I was planning to get married, being that they consider marriage such a sacred bond—even though they are allowed to have four wives apiece. Toward the end of our small talk I asked if they could email my mother on her birthday, which was nine days away. Redbeard said he would, and Chubs gave me back the notepad so I could write down her email address, along with a message that they would never send. With our business complete, I stood up to head back to my cell, and Redbeard asked me an unexpected question.

“Who is your God?” he inquired.

“My God? God is my God. The father of Jesus Christ,” I said, holding up one finger, a sign they use to say: *There is no God but Allah.*

Redbeard seemed to like my answer and Yassine was summoned to take me back. I shook both of their hands and noticed that Chubs had an exceptionally weak grip. Next it was Theo’s turn, and as I sat alone in the darkness of our cell I opened the Kit Kat and ate half of it, leaving the other bar under the balled-up blanket Theo used as a pillow. About thirty minutes must have passed before the door opened, and as it closed again after Theo I looked over my shoulder from where I sat with my head to the wall and saw Redbeard in the hallway. He was staring into the dark room, with what appeared to be awe. It was obvious that he had never seen people being kept in these conditions before.

“What happened?” I asked Theo, once the door was locked. “They give you food?”

“Yeah, half a piece of bread.”

“Did you save me any?”

“No.”

“Unbelievable! Look under your pillow.”

Theo reached under the blanket and took out the remaining Kit Kat, looking sheepish. A piece of flatbread in Syria is almost as big as a record album; he'd had more than enough to share. After I'd shamed him for not saving me any of the food he was given he handed the Kit Kat back and I ate it.

Theo explained that they were also charged with investigating him, but that most of the conversation had focused on my true identity.

“You'd be very happy with what I told them,” he said.

“Did you tell them they were beating us?” I asked.

“Yes, I told them how they flogged you because they think you're Jewish because of the tattoo.”

“*What?*” I slapped him on the top of his head. “Why the fuck would you put that idea in their head? And tell them about my tattoo?”

“It's okay, they didn't even care.”

“Oh my God, are you the dumbest fuck I've ever met in my life!”

Worse, going over what we'd discussed with the Canadians, Theo told me he'd mentioned to them that he'd been detained once on the Canadian border, entering the US on his way home from Syria. I had to restrain myself from wringing his neck.

“Why the *fuck* would you let them know you've spent time in the country they come from?” I yelled at him. “You think they're gonna wanna release us if they know that we know where they're from? Are you retarded?”

“Relax, I was just letting them know that I've had my own problems with our government.”

Now not only was Theo killing me slowly by driving me nuts, he was potentially actually killing me by putting the people in charge of investigating my identity onto the scent that I was Jewish and letting them know that he'd recognized their accents. At this point the Canadians were our best chance of being liberated—if they weren't just robbing me blind—and now thanks to my brilliant cellmate it was in their best interest to make sure we never saw the light of day.

One evening the emir paid us a visit with all the guards and instructed them to come back every night for a week to beat Theo. The first night it was Yassine and Sancho, one armed with an AK-47 and the other with a thick rope. As I lay on my stomach with my face inches from the wall, Yassine walked over to my

side of the bed; I could see his feet in my peripheral vision. Sancho approached on Theo's side. They started beating him: Yassine yelling at Theo in Arabic while out of the corner of my eye I saw the butt of the AK being brought down again and again, at the same time hearing the lash of the rope. I could have sworn that as Yassine bludgeoned Theo with his gun he was also being careful not to step on my blankets out of politeness. This went on for about a minute—as they left, Yassine turned at the entrance to the cell, rage carved into his face.

“He's a bad man! He had *nine girlfriends!*” he yelled, before slamming the door shut.

“I told you, you shouldn't have told him that,” I remarked.

When Yassine and Igor came to take Theo from the room they didn't say where they were going, but being that they weren't screaming at or hitting him like usual I didn't get the feeling that he was in danger. He was returned about fifteen minutes later with a head that had been so poorly buzzed he had bald spots all over. Then Yassine pointed to me. I argued that there was no need and removed my ski cap to remind them that I was already bald, except for the sides, but he had orders from the emir to shave our heads and trim our beards, and like it or not that was what was going to happen.

I was escorted to the end of the hallway where Igor waited for me, politely motioning to the floor while holding a pair of electric clippers. Reluctantly I sat down, Indian style, and he got to work. As I sat there watching the clumps of hair fall to the floor, I thought about when I'd visited Auschwitz, and remembered a room they had there, filled with thousands of pounds of human hair. I remembered footage I'd seen of prisoners jumping off the train cars on the way to the gas chambers, of them lying starving on the ground. That's what they were turning this place into, and they didn't even know I was Jewish.

Igor didn't get far because the blades weren't oiled; they kept getting stuck in my hair and ripping it out, and after I started complaining he got frustrated and stopped. He said he'd come back the next day, but when the next day came it was only Yassine who returned, with manual clippers, a pair of scissors, and Sancho. I began cutting my beard myself in the light of the open door, with the two of them standing above me. At one point Sancho began to tap me hard on the top of my head with his wooden club, but Yassine stopped him almost immediately.

“No, no, no,” he said in Arabic. “This one is to be pitied.”

After a few minutes they got sick of waiting and locked us in with the tools. Theo took over, doing about as good of a job on me as Igor had done on him. After he was done I started pacing back and forth on the blanket, launching fists at the air.

“Fucking maniacs are turning this place into Auschwitz!” I yelled.

Theo had no idea why I was so furious; he just sat there listening to me rant—not that he had a choice. Since we’d been here in hell I’d thought a lot about the Holocaust literature I’d read describing what it was like to be starved, beaten, and infested with parasites. Now, not only was I being treated like a prisoner in a concentration camp—whenever I peered at myself in the mirror, I looked like one as well.

The night the Little Judge appeared, all hooded up with an AK over his shoulder, the lights were out and I didn’t recognize him until he opened his mouth and I heard that shrill shriek of a voice. He was accompanied by two guys—one wearing a Puma jumpsuit and the other a suicide belt.

“He said we’re going to make videos,” Theo translated. “You have to say you’re a CIA agent.” The Little Judge said he planned to send the videos to Qatar, so they could act as intermediaries in negotiations for our freedom.

“Boss, there are three guys in masks doin’ an investigation on me,” I reminded him.

“Forget about the men in the masks,” said the Little Judge. “This is between you and me now. You will confess to being a CIA agent.”

“Forget it.”

“Don’t worry, when you get home you can tell everyone you told us because you were being tortured.”

“No.”

“Well, then you can sit in this room for five years and eat nothing but *halawa*.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Or I’ll just kill you,” he added.

“I’m not saying it.”

“I’ll come back in two days for an answer,” the Little Judge said, frustrated, and then he left.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned.

“Jumu’ah, what is your answer?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

A second later his cell phone rang and he held it up to my eyes so I could see the number in Arabic.

“Ah, it’s the American ambassador—Hello?” he said, answering the phone in English, trying to give the impression that negotiations were taking place.

He left, and Theo and I actually started to laugh.

“I can tell everyone that I admitted it under torture?” I asked, with a smirk.

“He doesn’t want you to get in trouble,” Theo answered, and in this darkest of moments we shared another real laugh together.

Theo thought the videos were just a fantasy, but I was very much convinced that the Little Judge intended to make them a reality. As always, I was tormented by the thought of my mother seeing her son on the internet, being held hostage by terrorists, beaten or worse. This was an important moment of my internment—it’s when, in my holders’ eyes, I officially went from photographer to CIA agent, and it’s also when the Little Judge stepped up to show me how big he really was.

February twenty-fifth, the day I had been dreading: my mother’s birthday. Not just any birthday—it was her sixty-fifth, the beginning of her golden years, and I was the sole reason it was ruined. The electricity was out, and I lay there in the dark thinking of my mom crying her eyes out on what was supposed to be a day of celebration. Before I’d left for Syria, the only danger I’d really considered was the danger to myself. Now, I found I could handle whatever horrors the jihadis threw at me better than I would have expected. The horrors I knew they—and I—were visiting upon my loved ones were a different story.

On this day, Theo and I got along. He didn’t start with me at all—no complaining, no snide comments, no tracking bugs onto the blankets. He was respectful, even supportive. At one point we decided to honor my mother by singing “Happy Birthday” to her, together. It was a beautiful moment on a terrible day, and one that I can honestly say I was happy to have him there for.

About two weeks later, on March ninth, we did the same thing for Theo’s mother on her birthday. When I woke up that morning I could see an ocean of emotions racing through him as he sat with his back to the wall. It was the only time I ever really saw him look concerned for another person, and I made sure to be just as supportive of him as he had been of me.

The next morning, the door opened and it was Yassine and Sancho, holding hand ties. They were moving us again. Our time in hell had finally come to an end.

THE HOSPITAL II

MARCH 10, 2013

When they led us outside, I was surprised at how beautiful the weather had become over the past month. Our room was always freezing, so once in the sunlight the change in temperature hit us hard. I felt my ski cap—blindfold becoming saturated with perspiration as I looked out beneath it at the crowd of jihadis standing around, waiting to take us wherever we were going. This time we were laid shoulder to shoulder instead of head to foot, and once we were in the trunk of the SUV they piled wool blankets on top of us until we could barely breathe. Within minutes my clothes were drenched with sweat and I leaned forward to pull off my hat. Yassine opened the back door, reached through to where Theo was lying, and started punching him on the top of the head over and over again like he was knocking on a door, all the while carrying on a conversation with one of his friends as if it were the most normal thing in the world. A few minutes later we were on the road, headed toward the unknown with General Mohammad’s voice blaring from the front seat.

About an hour had passed when we arrived; we were taken from the trunk and led into a building, down again, a flight of stairs to the basement. Once we were alone and locked inside a room, Theo and I lifted our blindfolds—to see that we were in the exact same cell they had taken us from over a month before. Nothing had changed except that the window was no longer blocked by bags of gravel, and a thick cable was fed into the cell between the bars and then through a hole in the concrete wall.

“Thank God!” I said. “We’re home!”

Theo felt the same. We were both hugely relieved to find ourselves brought back to the hospital, although we were still unclear about whether this meant our punishment for the door incident was over. Before we were transported I’d pocketed a piece of bread that I was saving; once we were alone I broke it out to avoid it being confiscated in case they searched us.

“Here,” I said, holding half out to Theo.

“No,” he said. “That’s yours.”

“No, look—we may fight about everything, but when it comes to food and water we’re brothers, and we share everything.” I handed him his piece, and we ate.

We kept expecting either the Little Judge or Mohammad to pay us a visit, to warn us against messing with the door again, or the cable running through the room, but neither came. Instead, a guard of around twenty popped in to take us to the bathroom, a cheerful new recruit with a baby face and a big head of thick black hair above it.

After the guard locked us in the bathroom I noticed a bag of old bread sitting on the radiator, and we ripped into it. This stale bread was actually trash, but since wasting food is considered *haram*, they often left a stockpile of it here. We didn’t know whether they planned to keep starving us, so to be on the safe side we stuffed our mouths and pockets with whatever we could. A few minutes after we were returned to our cell the new recruit was back again, this time with fresh bread and a big bowl of steaming-hot *Mamouniyeh*, a sweet porridge-like dish that tastes like heaven when you’ve just spent more than a month being starved in hell.

As the days passed, not only were we no longer being starved, we were fed better than ever. The last time we’d been here the standard had been two meals a day; now we got three. They brought us some extra clothes and three blankets apiece, which was a big step down from the nine that I’d had before we left for the electrical institute, but I guess in their view I did bite the hand that fed me and there was obviously no coming back from that.

By March fifteenth it almost felt like we’d never been gone—except for Theo’s behavior. It had been five days since our return and he was still spending all his time under the covers, only emerging to eat or hunt for bedbugs. Sometimes he’d humor me with a round of 20 Questions if I annoyed him long enough, but not often. To me this was more than a game, it was an important exercise to keep our minds active. Theo didn’t care, though, because he seemed to have barely any mind left.

But that night something happened, something so shocking it even drew Theo out of his blanket cave: we got a new cellmate. We’d been purposely isolated, kept apart from other prisoners for the almost three months we’d been together. When the door opened and a man hopped in on one leg, smiling and

joking with the guards, we couldn't have been more surprised if Navy SEALs had stormed the castle to rescue us. As soon as the door shut I stood up, extended my hand, and introduced myself. His name was Abdelatif.

"Are you American?" he asked, in perfect English.

When I said I was, he lit up and started talking—he had lived in the States for twelve years, until his deportation back to Morocco five years earlier for falsifying his personal information on a Banana Republic job application, and he still had two wives and three children in the US. I spread my blankets out to share, as they hadn't yet given any to the Moroccan, and we all took a seat. After so long with only Theo to talk to, the presence of another person who spoke my language was almost intoxicating. For all his hermit tendencies, Theo seemed to feel the same way—he was giddy as a schoolgirl, lying propped up on his elbows with a big smile on his pale face.

I received my second shock of the evening after Abdelatif asked who I was and what I was doing in Syria. When I told him I was a photographer, his face changed as if he'd had a sudden epiphany.

"Were you tortured?" he asked, sounding as if he already knew the answer.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Because I was in the room when they did it to you! I heard you saying *Ana moswer! Ana moswer!* Did you know there was an old man hanging by his wrists from a pipe right above your head?"

"No . . ."

And then there were three.

Abdelatif's story was fascinating, but full of lies so fantastic it was hard to believe there was a person on earth foolish enough to believe them, lies about everything from his occupation to the events leading up to his kidnapping. At thirty-two, he was the youngest of the three of us. He said he'd been trained as a cardiologist at an American university, and was one year from finishing his program, but I had my doubts. He'd been shot in the leg when the jihadis took him a month ago, and upon lifting his pants leg we saw that his entire thigh was filled with some kind of fluid and looked like it was ready to explode, though the wound had healed. Despite his supposed medical training he was baffled by this and kept asking us to diagnose him. I told him I didn't know, but to put him at ease said his femur probably wasn't broken (though we could feel the bone poking out). I almost laughed in the doctor's face at his response:

“What’s a femur?” he asked seriously.

His excuse for not knowing about things like femurs was that his primary focus had been cardiology, so then I asked if he knew what an arrhythmia was and he didn’t have a clue. Needless to say, after hearing that he’d been diagnosing and prescribing medications to the Syrian population when he was grabbed I was pretty sure I knew at least one of the reasons he’d been arrested, though he claimed to have no idea.

Abdelatif came to Syria from Morocco to aid the jihadis as a fake doctor. He arrived in early December after running away from home because of a brutal argument he’d had with his father, stealing his sister’s car and selling it so he could fund the trip. Once in Syria and posing as a doctor, he linked up with some FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra fighters from the town of Anadan, just north of Aleppo; started his own practice; and to hear him tell it, went on to save over 250 lives with nothing more than antibiotics.

Another cataclysmic error he made was marrying a veiled woman in her early thirties—women here usually marry young, and this one had waited years and what she got was a con man. Now this was a big deal. Not just because marriage is sacred, but because in the Muslim world, deciding to get married is a lot more involved than just getting on your knee and popping the question. You need to get permission from the woman’s father and after that you have to hand over a dowry. Abdelatif said he’d done all this, and on the night of the wedding, right after the ceremony, he decided to take a ride with his new brother-in-law. About fifty feet from the headquarters of a Jabhat al-Nusra *katiba* that he thought were his friends, a car cut them off and four armed gunmen jumped out with their AKs raised. One fired a shot through the center of Abdelatif’s windshield as a warning, but the Moroccan was impervious to fear and went for his pistol . . . which he dropped in the car after fumbling with it. His new brother-in-law ran off into the night, taking a bullet to the shoulder on the way, while Abdelatif got out and fought off all four men without a weapon for forty-five minutes, Bruce Lee style. You see, he had twenty years of Muay Thai martial arts training, or “My Thai,” as he pronounced it, and was a lethal weapon. In the end, the jihadis were only able to subdue him by pressing a pistol against his thigh and pulling the trigger. After that, he was blindfolded and thrown in the trunk of the car. They didn’t give him a tourniquet until he started banging on the roof of the trunk and begging them to pull over. About forty-five minutes later he arrived at the hospital, where he was greeted by someone sticking a pistol in his mouth and telling him he was a dead man before pulling

him from the trunk and tossing him on the ground to be kicked and stomped by a group of men.

Once inside he was placed on a gurney with a few parasite-infested blankets for a mattress and cuffed to the frame by his ankle and wrist before being wheeled into the filthy boiler room. There he lay for a week with a catheter emptying out into a bucket on the floor. That week had left its mark: he had a scar around his ankle from the handcuffs and this awful infection that had eaten through the entire back of his heel where it had rested against the metal bed frame. It was a sickly yellowish purple; I thought it was gangrene, it was so rotted. Twice a day someone came to feed him, but when he asked for water he was almost always denied—and all the while, the torture and the screaming continued in the boiler room, right there in front of him.

Whatever the reasons for his arrest, it was clear that his offenses had called for the harshest of treatment. Occasionally he'd received a visit from a man named Kawa, who was in charge of investigating him and his case. When I asked him to describe Kawa, Abdelatif said he was “the short one, with glasses.” It was the Little Judge. We finally knew his name.

Within a few hours, Abdelatif and I were friends. He may have been a liar, but at least he had a sense of humor—after almost two months with Theo, this was the most refreshing thing God could have given me besides freedom. Abdelatif did pledge his allegiance to al-Nusra, but he also spoke extremely highly of America and said it was his dream to move back there someday. The fact that he loved rap music, women, and American movies and TV gave us plenty to talk about. In fact, I could not have been more surprised to learn what his favorite sitcom was.

“You like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*?” I asked, shocked.

“That’s my nigga!” he said—referring to Larry David.

I was surprised they hadn’t shot him for that.

When the guards finally brought him some blankets, we spread his on top of mine to maximize our comfort and slept side by side. As for Theo, his excitement over our new cellmate waned once we started talking about American pop culture—a subject even a Moroccan terrorist knew more about than he did—and he’d retreated back under his own blankets. We invited him to join us several times, but he stayed put the rest of the night while Abdelatif and I stayed up, telling stories about where we came from and the people we knew there, and about life here as well.

“What’s he saying?” I asked, referring to an inmate up the hall, who we could hear banging on his door and yelling.

“He’s hungry,” said the Moroccan. It had to be at least 2 AM, so the request for room service seemed a little much.

“What does he think this is, his mother’s house?” I asked.

About half an hour later, one of the guards finally came to see what all the knocking was about. Their voices carried easily down the quiet hall, and the Moroccan and I just about fell over laughing when he translated the guard’s response:

“What do you think this is, your mother’s house?”

Needless to say, the guy got nothing.

When we heard the *Adhan* calling everyone to prayer we couldn’t believe it was morning already. By the time we passed out it was broad daylight, and I felt better than I had since being thrown in with Theo. I finally had someone to really talk to. It’s amazing how little a difference in ideology means when two people are tossed into the same boat heading toward the same waterfall—or so I thought, anyway.

Abdelatif was shocked to see how poorly Theo was treated, and in the beginning, he pitied him. Because he was a Sunni and a jihadi, he was pretty sure that he was going to be released soon, so he gave Theo his Nike jumpsuit jacket, figuring that he wouldn’t be needing it for long. I told him not to offer it and Theo not to accept, being that the room was cold and there was no guarantee that Abdelatif was going anywhere—not to mention that, as nasty as it was, Theo already had a jacket—but Abdelatif wasn’t worried about the temperature and said Allah rewards those who give charity to the less fortunate. However, potential rewards from Allah were something Abdelatif was willing to forgo if it gave him a better chance of freedom, as we learned the next morning when the door opened and Fenster asked if we needed to use the bathroom.

“No, I’m good,” I said, closing my eyes to go back to sleep.

“No thanks,” Abdelatif said in Arabic, doing the same.

“I have to go,” said Theo, standing up.

“No, you can wait, dog!” Fenster barked, and slammed the door.

“Damn, Theo!” said Abdelatif. “What did you do to make them hate you so much?”

“Nothing,” Theo insisted.

Still, seeing this made Abdelatif worry that being nice to Theo could jeopardize his release and lead to persecution from the guards, so he asked for his jacket back. Theo took it off and handed it over, but Abdelatif was so disgusted by the foul odor it emitted after only a day in Theo's possession that he gave it back again. I would have offered to wash and return it, seeing as the man now had no jacket and the room was chilly, but Theo accepted it without a word.

Since returning from the electrical institute, Theo had become increasingly distant and his behavior increasingly disturbing. One morning we caught him on his elbows and knees with a blanket pulled all the way over his head, playing with the bedbugs he had just removed from his clothing. I watched this as I paced, and it really started to get under my skin.

"Theo, come on, what are you doin', naming them?"

"Leave me alone," he responded, without taking his eyes from the parasites.

"Jesus Christ!" I exclaimed in disgust, bringing my slipper down on the five or so bugs that he'd corralled and smearing his blood all over the floor.

Displays like this would send my mood plummeting when I'd been up minutes before. Theo was losing it a little more each day and there didn't seem to be anything anyone could do about it. I'd tried to talk to him, explaining that his behavior was affecting the morale of everyone in the room, hoping that he'd try to get it together for us if not for himself. His response was always confrontational, some version of telling me that he didn't care, or to shut up and leave him alone. No matter how much I sometimes hated him, I never stopped trying to reach him, though it became harder and harder the more withdrawn and difficult he became.

Two days after Abdelatif joined our happy little family the door opened and Kawa, the jihadi formerly known as the Little Judge, entered in a denim shirt, looking determined and walking tall.

"Jumu'ah, come with me!" he ordered.

I covered my eyes and we walked out into the hallway together. As soon as the door was closed he grabbed the hood of my sweatshirt, pulled it down until I was hunched over, and punched me in the face. The punch was curiously painless and wouldn't even leave a mark, so weak it was hard to believe it had come from a grown man. He pulled me down the hallway by my hood and led me into the boiler room, sitting me down on the floor in the dark. I listened as others followed us into the room, and I braced myself for the tire or the

electricity I had heard them using on other prisoners. Yassine then crouched down to my right and translated for Kawa:

“Say you are a CIA or I will hit you very hard.”

“But I’m not a CIA,” I said.

Yassine conveyed my response to Kawa and I immediately felt a kick to the side of my head at the same time that a thick cable struck the side of my foot. Unlike the punch, this hurt, and I let out a yell through a clenched jaw.

“Say you are a CIA or I will hit you very hard,” Yassine repeated.

“But Yassine, I’m not a CIA.”

After he translated this I felt another kick to the side of my head along with another lash to my foot. Kawa then stormed out of the room as if he was going to get something, something to use to break me and end this game once and for all. I sat there and contemplated my situation. I knew that management’s patience in waiting for my confession had run out, and I had heard enough victims screaming by now to know that if these people wanted you to say something, you were eventually going to say it. It didn’t matter how tough you were; it didn’t matter who you were—and it definitely didn’t matter if it was true. I came to the conclusion that I had lasted longer than any other civilian probably would have and it was time to fold. It wasn’t like I was endangering anyone else with my fake confession, and if I ever wanted to make it home or escape I had to stay as healthy as possible, which meant not inviting torture out of foolish pride.

“All right,” I said to Yassine, with my head down. “I’m a CIA agent.”

As soon as the words left my mouth Yassine ran from the room, ecstatic, to brag about being the one who’d finally gotten me to say the magic words. I heard him telling Kawa the good news, and then he returned to take me back to my cell with no further abuse.

When I got back into the room, Theo and Abdelatif greeted me with identical raised brows and inquisitive looks that said: *Well?*

“I did it,” I told them. “I confessed.”

This was no surprise to either of them, especially when they heard what had happened after Kawa took me down to the boiler room. Theo smiled and looked ecstatic that I had at last been brought down to his level. About two hours later the door opened again; this time it was Abu Dejana, Kawa’s assistant. He led me across the hall and into the kitchen, where a video camera sat on a tripod. Kawa stood beside it, holding an orange jumpsuit. Next to him was Chubs the

Canadian, wearing his usual black mask. In his hand was a small notepad.

“How’s my investigation goin’?” I asked him sarcastically.

Chubs didn’t answer, just translated Kawa’s instructions to put on the jumpsuit as he handed it to me. I pulled it on over my clothes with a deep sense of dread. Making one of these videos was one of the two things that I’d feared the most during my imprisonment, because of what it would do to my mother. The other one was decapitation. Once the jumpsuit was on I turned to Kawa and held out my arms.

“How do I look?” I asked.

“Take off your hat,” Chubs translated.

“Oh, come on, man, don’t make me take off my hat!” I said. “Please. I look terrible.” I pointed to my bald head and the scruffy hair at the sides that I always kept shaved back home.

“He said to take it off,” Chubs countered.

“But I don’t want my mother to see me like this.”

“He doesn’t care. You have to take it off.”

“Well, if I take it off, can I get some yogurt and bread for me and the boys?”

When Chubs translated this, Kawa looked down, shaking his head and smiling as if to say, *The balls on this fuckin’ guy*. Then he nodded and answered:

“When we’re finished.”

I could tell right away he wasn’t used to negotiating with Jews.

And so, with great reluctance, I removed my hat and took my place in front of the gray wall facing the camera. It was obvious that this video was going to have no production value at all. There were no flags behind me or masked men standing in the frame holding weapons. I can’t explain it, but even while overcome with dread over this video and the pain it would cause those at home to see it, I also had the distinct feeling that this was all bullshit and the video would never see the light of day.

Chubs went through the questions that were going to be hurled at me on camera. The first few just focused on my background to establish my identity—my name, address, occupation, and the names of my parents. The last two questions were the most important to Kawa, as those were the ones that would prove my guilt.

“Why did you come to Syria?” Chubs asked.

I gave my usual answer—that I was there to take photos—and he told me to amend it to say that I was there to take photos for the CIA.

“And who did you send these pictures to?”

“Who did I send them to?” I asked, confused. I didn’t actually know anyone at the CIA, so I wasn’t sure what they wanted from me.

“Yes, who did you send them to?”

My first instinct was to say Art Vandelay, the name George Costanza used in *Seinfeld* whenever he had to lie about something, but then I thought of all the hilarious-but-potentially-deadly-to-me comments Americans would post should the video ever be uploaded to YouTube and reconsidered. Humiliating the jihadis like that would probably make them put the tire on me and never take it off.

“I sent them to some guy at the CIA,” I responded.

Surprisingly, this was good enough for them, so Chubs hit record on the camera and we went through the whole routine twice. I wanted to give the impression that I was perfectly okay, or as okay as I could be under the circumstances, so I spoke in an enthusiastic, game-show-host kind of voice that I knew would crack up my friends back home, being careful not to be so blatant that they’d make me redo it. After we were finished I turned to Kawa and extended my hand. For the first time, he shook it.

“Are you happy?” I asked.

“Yes, Jumu’ah,” he replied.

Abu Dejana led me back to the cell and took Theo for his turn. While Theo was gone I filled in Abdelatif on what had transpired in the kitchen. My “some guy at the CIA” answer gave us both a chuckle.

“You should have said Agent Theo Curtis,” he said, and we laughed.

When Theo returned he told us he’d been given the same questions as I had been, only instead of sending photos to the CIA he was told to say he sent reports.

A few minutes later Abu Dejana was back yet again. He handed me three pieces of bread and a bowl. When I saw the bowl was filled with halawa, I looked up at Abu Dejana with a *What the fuck?* expression.

“Hey man, I asked for yogurt!” I said.

He rolled his eyes and slammed the door in my face.

“I think you guys should become Muslims,” Abdelatif said often.

He said it would increase our chances of release, which I knew was probably true, and that it would keep us safe because the Koran says Muslims can’t kill other believers—apparently nobody outside our walls had gotten to that page

yet.

The truth was I'd been thinking about this for a while. My first week in captivity I'd tried to plant the seeds for a possible conversion by asking for a Koran in English, but they refused to supply me with one. I'd figured I could pretend that reading it, over time, led me to find Allah, and thought that discovering the faith "naturally" this way would make it more believable, and not only enhance my chances of survival but also improve my treatment. Another motivating factor was the possibility that conversion would create an opportunity to escape. Once I switched teams I could try nagging the emir and guards into taking me to a mosque to pray. Some of those mosques had thousands of people praying in them on any given day, which meant I might have a real chance if I managed to melt into the crowd. Once the Moroccan joined us in our cell I got the idea to convert by pretending that I felt God in the room every time he prayed.

For now, whenever he made his conversion pitch I pretended to be intrigued by it, but not convinced, anxious not to appear too eager and give away the fact that I was a complete phony.

Sometimes Abdelatif awoke in the middle of the day babbling in French and Italian. Due to his broken leg he always slept facedown, and when this happened he'd raise his head in panic with fear etched into his face. As he muttered whatever it was he was saying, I'd have to shake him back to consciousness. I had never seen anyone so scared before in my life, but I guess spending a week in the boiler room will do that to a man. I can only imagine what he saw in his dreams.

Awake, though, he was stubborn and confident, with the kind of bullying, rigid personality that insists on dominance. He may have been the youngest man in the room, but in his mind he was in charge. For one thing, he was both an Arab and a Sunni Muslim, and according to him these two characteristics made him fundamentally superior to us in nearly every way. He could spend hours pontificating on the reasons behind his racial and religious superiority, not just when he was trying to get us to convert, but whenever he was frustrated about what he considered unfair treatment. I'm not the type to sit around being berated and insulted, so we would often get into arguments over his opinions, and I constantly cut off his ranting by telling him to shut the fuck up already. Our disputes inevitably became loud and borderline physical, and it was during these that our once solid relationship began to steadily deteriorate.

Theo seemed overjoyed by these arguments, and would come out from under the covers to watch, wearing a nauseating, smug expression on his face. The fact that he was universally despised while I was not was hard for him to understand, and I think he hoped that the rift opening up between Abdelatif and me would give him an ally at last. To build this alliance, Theo began offering the Moroccan his services.

“You want to do some physical therapy?” he asked.

When they began these sessions, Abdelatif could barely bend his leg or put any weight on it at all. Theo would lift the injured leg up and down in stretches and usually end with a massage. I thought the whole routine was bullshit considering Theo had no experience in the field and the guy still had a bullet in his broken thigh, but one day at a time the Moroccan’s ability to walk and bend his leg improved—all thanks to Dr. Curtis.

Unfortunately, like all of Theo’s plans, attempting to ally himself with Abdelatif would backfire. Soon he was helping the Moroccan with everything, including disrobing on bathroom trips, where his injured leg forced him to shit in a bucket because he could not hold himself in a squat to use the toilet. It became common to find Theo clenching our cellmate’s soiled underwear in his bare hands as he waited for him to finish, and while one might expect a ritual like this to bring two captives closer together, it didn’t. Instead, it only brought Theo further under the Moroccan’s thumb, until he was Abdelatif’s own personal prison bitch.

The Moroccan liked to make rules, and one he was especially adamant about was that no one could eat off his side of the bowl that we all shared—he said that even his mother did not eat off the same side as him. This was fine with me because it worked both ways; Theo, of course, didn’t pay attention to rules or requests, whether they were about bedbugs or bowls. Abdelatif must have warned him close to dozen times not to eat from his side, but as soon as the next meal was dropped it was as if these conversations had never taken place. Theo would rip off a piece of bread, reach right over his portion of the food, and scoop some from the Moroccan’s side of the bowl. One morning, the camel’s back finally broke.

“Theo, what did I tell you?” the Moroccan shouted, picking up a plate of olives and throwing it aside.

“What the fuck!” I yelled.

Abdelatif may have had a busted leg, but you would have never known it from the way he pounced on Theo, gripping him by the throat with one hand and pinning him to the ground, throttling him with a fist cocked above his face. True to form, Theo didn't make a sound or fight back at all. He didn't moan, he didn't squirm; he didn't even grab the wrist of the man strangling him to death.

"I'll fucking kill you!" the Moroccan screamed over and over, and Theo just lay there, arms outstretched, waiting as always to die or be rescued.

Being that Theo had provoked this reaction by ignoring the man's reasonable request, I let it continue for a few moments so that he could learn from his mistake, but once he started turning blue I had to step in. Did I hate his guts? Yes! Did he ask for this? Yes! But I was sticking to my code, and Americans back each other up on the battlefield, whether they get along or not.

"Come on, man, get off him," I said.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Abdelatif was still screaming, spit flying out of his mouth.

Seeing that my words were having no effect, I stood up and gave the Moroccan a stern tap on the shoulder and repeated myself. Finally, I grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him off.

"He can't breathe!" I yelled. "Get off him!"

When Abdelatif turned to me, his eyes were filled with such intense rage that it became instantly clear: if I hadn't been there, he really would have killed him.

"You okay?" I asked Theo.

"Yeah," he croaked in a hoarse voice.

After placing the rinsed olives back on the plate we all sat down and ate, like the dysfunctional family we had become. Nothing more was said, but Theo stuck to his side of the bowl, this time and every time after.

Despite what had happened, within an hour or two Abdelatif was lounging on the floor with his wounded leg on Theo's shoulder as he kneeled before him, massaging away like a slave. I was truly embarrassed for him, and half surprised he didn't offer to finish his master off with a happy ending.

Because Abdelatif was an Arab and a Sunni, we all thought he had the best chance of being released. Seeing that this was an opportunity to get word of our fate to the outside world I pounced on it like a cheetah. Convincing a self-proclaimed jihadi and member of Jabhat al-Nusra to walk into a US embassy was going to take a little finessing; to overcome this challenge I had to get inside

the crazy fuck's head and exploit the one thing he wanted more than anything in the world: to be reunited with his wife and kids in America. I got to work on it, and eventually had him convinced that if he presented himself at the US embassy in Turkey and told them everything he knew about what had happened to Theo and me they would take him in, fix his leg, reunite him with his family, *and* throw in US citizenship for his troubles. By the end of my spiel, the Moroccan looked like a little kid who'd just seen Santa for the first time. If they'd opened the door and freed him at that moment, Allah himself could not have stopped him from getting to an American embassy.

Then he asked Theo for his opinion.

"No, they'll arrest you," he said. "Just send an email."

Abdelatif shot his attention my way and I scrambled to convince him that Theo didn't know what he was talking about, but the damage was done. Theo had shown he would rather advise an admitted terrorist on how to avoid arrest than agree with anything I said, and he'd created doubt in the mind of the one person who could possibly help us about whether or not he should.

We were never quite sure what caused the food poisoning, but it was either the spoiled yogurt or the contaminated water we were forced to drink. Whenever the water was out at the hospital we'd fill our bottles from a hose that was fed into the bathroom and slung over one of the faucets. The hose water was so brown it looked like watered-down iced tea, and at first I refused to drink it, but seeing that they would let me die of thirst before they invested in bottled water or boiled it made me realize that Gandhi would have been fucked in this place, so I drank up.

It was early in the day when my stomach started to gurgle discontentedly, and before I knew it, I was pounding on the door.

"Bathroom, please! Bathroom! Emergency!" I screamed in Arabic.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred times when you knocked, whoever answered the door would say they'd come back in five minutes and then return in five hours, but on this day I must have been pretty convincing because when the guard opened the door I was taken without delay. As soon as we got to the hallway, I broke away from him and ran blindfolded to the bathroom.

Once inside the stall I tore my pants down and dropped into a squat like I'd just had a chair pulled out from under me, and a split second later I was spraying shit into the toilet like a busted fire hydrant. There was absolutely nothing solid

coming out of me, and when I looked into the toilet there was nothing to see; it just ran down the sides like rain. Between bursts I would stand and squat, stand and squat, hoping that my stomach would turn over so I could get the next round out before I was locked in my cell again. But there always seemed to be another round after that, and so when the guard came to take me back I grabbed a bucket before heading down the hallway, just in case.

Reentering the cell I realized I had a serious problem on my hands. My colon was nowhere near through with me, but maybe with enough willpower I could hold it off until our next bathroom trip. After pacing a few laps I decided to lie down and try to sleep as much of the morning away as possible, but as soon as I lay down my stomach kicked back into full swing. I definitely didn't want to be the first one to shit in a bucket, so I just bitched and whined until I couldn't take it anymore. Once again I pounded on the door and once again the same guard answered. We called him the Fat Man—he was one of the new guards we'd met upon our return; he'd seemed okay, but on this day he proved that he was much better than that. I must have knocked on the door close to a dozen times before evening and almost every time I did, it opened to reveal the Fat Man on the other side, wearing the goofy grin that came with helping the American with the runs.

By nightfall the sickness had not improved and the medication the guards gave me did little to stop the flow. In fact, I'm pretty sure the pill they gave me for diarrhea was the same one they gave Abdelatif for his broken leg. This made me remember the Holocaust literature I had read again, and how diarrhea had been one of the main causes of death in the camps. I started worrying that I had dysentery, and my pacing and fretting began to get on my cellmate's nerves.

“Just handle it,” said Abdelatif. “Be a man!”

This was easier said than done—as he would learn for himself later that night.

Theo and I were sound asleep when the Moroccan jumped up, hobbled over to the door, and started pounding.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“I gotta shit!” he yelled in a panic. “Grab the bucket!”

“Come on, man, just knock—”

“Grab the fuckin' bucket!” he screamed, heading right for me.

Realizing there wasn't a second to spare, I leapt up, grabbed the bucket, and placed it on the floor behind him as he ripped off his pants. A second later Theo was holding him by one hand and I held the other as we lowered him down to

the bucket, which was about the size of a pail kids use to build sandcastles at the beach.

“Just be careful, man,” I said. “That shit spills and we’re in trouble.”

The sound effects discharged by Abdelatif’s asshole rivaled any artillery shells we had heard going off outside. We must have held him over that bucket for a good five minutes before he gave us the okay to stand him back up.

“What was that you said to me before about being a man?” I asked.

“Yo, you were right,” he apologized. “That was no joke!”

After taking Theo’s water bottle and heading to the back of the room, Abdelatif—still naked and dripping with shit—asked me to help him clean himself up.

“Does this look like fuckin’ *Kiss of the Spider Woman* to you, man?” I said, disgusted. “Ask Theo.”

And just as you can guess, that was exactly what happened, and Theo gladly cleaned the shit off Abdelatif, and later carried his brimming bucket of feces and the piss bottle down the hallway to the bathroom, blindfolded and trailed by Yassine, who was toting an AK-47 and yelling at him the whole way about what would happen to him if he spilled it.

We went on like this for seven straight days, without a break or any medical attention. I remember thinking it was no longer just a metaphor: we were now literally living in a world of shit.

When we’d first returned to the hospital the light situation had been better than ever, not just because the window was no longer blocked, but because the electricity was more reliable. Shortly after Abdelatif joined us things went downhill in this department, with the power out more often than it was on. We were in complete darkness from sundown until sunrise for long stretches, once for nine days. Eventually, it got so bad that they put a generator outside and ran lights into every cell through small holes drilled above our doors. We were grateful to have the light even though the switch was outside the door and we no longer controlled it.

Early one evening we were all just chilling in our own private hell when we heard the piercing shriek of a MiG slice the air above the hospital. I saw a tiny piece of paper lying on the floor shortly after but assumed it was a tag from one of our shirts that had fallen off and didn’t give it a second thought. Later,

however, Theo did, and it turned out to be one of the greatest contributions he made the entire time we were locked up together. He'd gotten up to take a piss, and when he bent over and picked up the scrap I saw his face light up; he headed right for me with his hand extended. I took the paper, a little white rectangle smaller than my pinkie nail, and flipped it over. On one side was a circular stamp with two children holding hands inside it; under them were three tiny words, in English: *Aleppo Pediatric Hospital*.

"Holy shit!" I said. "We know where we are!"

"It's a sign from Allah!" the Moroccan proclaimed.

For the rest of the night we were all in high spirits. It feels paralyzing, being locked in a room and having absolutely no idea where you are, where you would even be if you somehow escaped. Now we knew, and better still, our captors had no idea that we knew.

When the torture would get really bad outside our walls I used to say we were God's messengers, and that it was our job to live so that we could tell the world what went on here. Now "here" had a name.

The building we were in was part of a large compound consisting of several hospitals with a wall around it. When gunfire and explosions erupted from the south end it was broad daylight; I'd been pacing the cell as my two cellmates slept soundly on the floor.

"Wake up!" I yelled. "The regime's attacking!"

It took the jihadis outside our cell about as long to figure out what was going on as it had taken me, and within seconds I heard them running and yelling, along with the sounds of clips being popped into AKs and the actions being slid back. All of their footsteps faded in the same direction: up the stairs. When I looked out the window I saw a wave of fighters rushing toward the battle with their rifles slung over their shoulders, the twelve-year-old, Abu Jaz, among them.

"Wake up!" I repeated. "They're trying to take the hospital!"

"It's just another group," the Moroccan said without opening his eyes.

"I don't think so."

He went back to sleep. I was in awe at how he and Theo could lie there, in complete denial about what was happening. As the battle continued to rage for well over an hour it became clear that the Moroccan was wrong: this wasn't just another militia group, this was the government. It also became clear that the entire floor, probably the entire building, was now completely vacant. Guards,

emirs, kids—everyone was busy fighting.

I stared at Theo as he slept, with such intense hatred that I felt both of my hands involuntarily clench into rock-hard fists. This was the moment, the opportunity we would have been ready for if only he had let me perforate the panel in the door months earlier. Now, at this moment we could have kicked it out and walked away, and as long as we headed north we would have had over an hour's head start before anyone realized we were gone.

When the gunfire finally died down there was about a minute of silence before I heard the roar of a MiG cutting straight toward us. The Moroccan's eyes shot open and looked at me. I stared right back at him, my expression saying *I told you it was the government*. A moment later the plane flew directly over us and dropped a bomb on a neighboring building, the explosion rocking the very foundation of the hospital. That ended the battle, and the compound remained in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra—as did I, all because Theo refused to follow my plan.

On March twenty-eighth, the door opened and in walked Mohannad. He had been kidnapped after defecting from the army while posted at the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, where I had been shooting back when I was still free. They'd told him that he would only be with us for a few hours before he was released, but he was a Shia, so I had my doubts.

With another Arab in our cell it was like the Moroccan took off the mask he had been wearing since he joined us, ignoring me and speaking only in Arabic as if I wasn't in the room. When I pulled him aside and said something he told me to relax, that he was just gathering information. By nightfall Abdelatif was blaming America for all his woes and Mohannad was still with us. He wasn't going anywhere that night.

The next day I decided to make my move and become a fake Muslim.

We were sitting on my blankets listening to Mohannad run down all the names of the Prophet when Abdelatif brought up conversion for the hundredth time. I didn't want to fold too quickly so we went back and forth a little like usual. Then I expressed apprehension about the guards thinking I was faking it and giving me shit, and the Moroccan made a good point.

"If you're a Muslim then you don't care what the guards think," he said. "Only Allah."

“That’s true,” I said thoughtfully. “All right, let’s do it! I’m down!”

“But you can’t fake it,” Abdelatif warned. “You have to promise me that you will stay a Muslim when you go home.”

Naturally I made the promise, lying my ass off, and with that out of the way Abdelatif led me in reciting a few poorly pronounced Arabic words and—wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am—just like that, I was a Muslim, kind of. I didn’t have even the slightest idea what the fuck I’d said, but it was a very proud moment for Abdelatif and Mohannad, both thinking they’d scored big points with Allah for bringing over a nonbeliever.

Theo would have nothing to do with converting. He’d found out just how dangerous fake conversion was after writing his *Undercover Muslim* book, but of course I knew nothing about that, and he didn’t tell me. I tried to talk him into it one day when we were locked in the bathroom and I had him all to myself.

“I’m not changing my religion,” he insisted in his soft voice.

“Who gives a fuck, man! None of this is even real!” I hissed in a whisper.

“It doesn’t matter how much you yell. I’m not doing it.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re a fuckin’ atheist, man, and you don’t wanna change your religion?”

“I don’t want to lie,” he had the balls to say to me.

And that was the end of it. Theo let me convert, knowing the danger it put me in, and the almost certain death sentence I’d be facing if they ever discovered his true identity. I had just converted while locked up with the self-proclaimed “Undercover Muslim.” There was no way that the most paranoid and irrational people on earth would ever believe I hadn’t known who Theo was—though I hadn’t—or that he didn’t tutor me on how to successfully deceive them—though of course he never did. If Theo was discovered, we would likely have been separated and I would have been tortured for months, interrogated with questions I had no hope of answering about someone who was supposed to be my brother in arms, but who in reality I knew almost nothing about. And after that they would have sawed my head off online, to show the world what happens to “Undercover Muslims” in Syria.

Sometime after the lights went out for the night, Abu Dejana opened the door and took Mohannad from the room. He said Mohannad was going to court, and the word in the other rooms the Moroccan had been in before joining us was that this meant he was probably going home, but we’d never really know. There were

gunshots outside all the time—only God and the jihadis knew how many were executions and how many were just target practice.

Once it was just the three of us again I got a glimpse into the soul of the Moroccan, and what I saw was a roiling, bottomless pit of rage and hatred. Being in a room with another Muslim for only twenty-four hours had transformed him. Before, he'd rhapsodized about how much he loved the US and longed to return. Now, "the Jewish state of America" was his enemy. He even tried to convince me that Kawa and the rest of the jihadis who were literally holding me prisoner were actually my brothers. Because I was a Muslim he expected me to share his opinions, which was especially hard to take once he started in on Israel.

"If I don't die here in Syria on the battlefield I'll just go to Israel and blow myself up in a restaurant," he said nonchalantly.

I couldn't believe I was hearing this from a man who was sharing my blankets. As a Jew, it was hard to remain composed, but I fought to suppress any reaction that might invite suspicion as to my true faith.

All night we argued about these things while Theo hid under the covers, but in the morning, after a few hours' sleep, Abdelatif was back to his old self. He would later justify these incidents by claiming he was "a bipolar."

Now that there were three of us in the room we started playing games. The first was checkers—I carved a board into the tile floor with a screw, and Theo made pieces out of an orange peel—but during the very first game between me and the Moroccan I pulled off a sick triple jump that sent him into a rage, claiming that they didn't play like that in the Arab world, and while in Syria I had to follow their rules. Then he just quit.

The next game we attempted was hacky sack. I made a ball out of the same orange peel—shredded it, placed it in the corner of a plastic bread bag, wrapped it inside a piece of fabric, and then tied a shoelace tightly around the whole thing. Naturally the Moroccan could not play, and he'd pout as Theo and I kicked the poorly made ball back and forth, though it kept unwinding in the air.

The third and best game was baseball. Abdelatif's leg had improved to the point where he could hobble around, and I managed to get a broom back to our cell and kept it hidden by leaning it against the part of the wall covered by the door when it was open. Once we unscrewed the handle we had a bat, and once I made a more solid ball we had a game. The batter would stand by the door so he

could hide the stick if a guard approached, and the pitcher stood on the far side of the cell. If the batter hit the lower part of the wall it was a single, the middle was a double, and the top was a triple. To get a home run you had to knock it into the window. We had fun and killed a lot of time this way, and even got some laughs whenever a foul tip hit the door and one of the guards came to see what we were knocking for. But the best way to kill time, the activity that became crucial to our way of life, would not be discovered until I was pacing the room one day and asked the Moroccan a seemingly arbitrary question about a seemingly random movie.

“Yo, you ever see *The Beach*?”

The Moroccan said he had.

“Yeah, I keep thinking of that place. It’s the most beautiful place in the world. I gotta go there one day if I get outta this alive.”

And then the Moroccan and I were off, talking about the movie in such detail that before I knew it I was spinning the whole thing out from the beginning by memory. Theo, of course, crawled under the covers immediately, as if the sound of my voice was toxic to his ears. I don’t think he ever blazed up in his life so he probably wouldn’t have appreciated it anyway.

And from that moment until the day we were transferred, we would “watch movies” like this every night after the sun went down. I would retell everything from *A Clockwork Orange* to *Platoon*, *The Big Lebowski* to *The Goonies*. My fondest memory of this activity was made one night when we were watching *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and I got a little too into character while describing the fight between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched over the World Series.

“I want that television set turned on!” I screamed, standing over the Moroccan, red in the face. “Right now!”

“SHUT UP!” a guard yelled suddenly from the hallway, smashing the door in a rage.

I leapt into the air, legs kicking like a cartoon character, and sat my ass down beside Abdelatif. We all stared at the door in silence, waiting to see if it was going to open, and then the Moroccan turned to look at me.

“Man, I’d give anything for a fuckin’ wiener right now!” I said, breaking into a huge smile.

Once we realized nobody was coming, I was back on my feet, reciting the rest of the movie.

It was cathartic, having to rely on my memory to entertain us like that, and it always reminded me of when I was a little kid, and my dad heard me recite the entire first twenty minutes of *Spaceballs*.

“You can remember all this, but you can’t remember your school-work?” he’d asked, shaking his head in disappointment.

We would do this for hours every night and it always seemed to relieve whatever tensions had built up during the day between the Moroccan and me. Honestly, “watching movies” was probably the one thing that kept us from killing each other; it helped preserve the little friendship that still remained between us. Sometimes when reciting I would have to speak up, louder and louder, to drown out the screams of men being tortured a few doors down. Other nights, the screams would force me to stop.

It didn’t take long for word of my conversion to spread. I’d worried that some of the guards might give me a hard time, but they all dug the fact that I’d become a Muslim, and while I can’t say that it made my treatment any better right away, I can say that it definitely made Theo’s worse.

“You good,” the guards would say to me. Then they’d turn to Theo. “You not good. You dog!” Once, Thug Life even spit on the floor after his insult and then slammed the door.

When it came time to choose my Muslim name, I’d taken Nassir, although the guards still called me Jumu’ah. The Moroccan explained that this was a serious part of the conversion, so when he grilled me as to why I’d picked that name I said it was after a great man I stayed with in Aleppo, but that was bullshit. I picked it because I’m a huge Nas fan, and I figured it was a great way to mock my captors and the entire ritual. I remember strutting down the hallway once, right after I became Nassir, hat pulled down, hearing one guard call out, “Jumu’ah Muslim!” as I high-fived another, all while kickin’ track three of *Illmatic* in my head with a big smile on my face:

*Life’s a bitch and then you die; that’s why we get high
'Cause you never know when you’re gonna go*

I had to mumble a few of the lines in the second verse, because it had been a while, but I had the important ones down cold—“Life’s a bitch, and then you die.”

Now that I was a Muslim I had to play the part, and I have to admit I was a little touched when they brought me my Koran. A kid of about fourteen and another jihadi with a black scarf wrapped around his face entered our room holding the massive book.

“Is that for me?” I asked, confused.

“*Nam*,” said the one in the scarf, handing it over.

After I’d shaken their hands and thanked them, they left. The Moroccan was very pleased with this addition to our room—all he had was a tiny pocket-sized version that was falling apart. Now we had a metallic-blue, 2,000-page hardcover edition that had been funded by the king of Saudi Arabia, the pages split with Arabic on the right side, English on the left, and usually about a quarter to a half a page of footnotes—the hands-down nicest copy in the whole prison. When I sat down and opened it up, I felt true excitement at finally getting my hands on a book, any book. I read it carefully, always looking for passages that spoke to my current situation, so I could hurl them at the guards. The one I used the most came from Surah al-Baqarah, and I never stopped shoving it in all of their faces:

And we will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.

THE VILLA

APRIL 13, 2013

When the door opened that day, Yassine and Abu Dejana were on the other side, the latter holding thick plastic hand ties. I knew we were being transferred, and I immediately grabbed my Koran and ran up to Yassine, laying it on thick to convince him of my newfound love for Islam. He accepted the book from me and promised to return it when we reached our destination. I then held out my hands and he secured the ties loosely around my wrists so I would be comfortable during the ride. A few seconds later we were lined up by the door, blind and bound, holding our blankets with our clothes wrapped inside them and awaiting instructions. There was a lot of commotion coming from the hallway, as if the entire organization was moving out along with us.

I hadn't been outside since we'd returned from the electrical institute, thirty-four days before, so when at last I stepped into the sunlight and warm air I felt like Dorothy landing in Oz. We were loaded into the back of a work van, the kind with two doors that opened out and a low roof, like exterminators and locksmiths use in the States.

Inside the truck it was a furnace, and with the ski cap as a blindfold I was sweating like a cold beer. We all kept quiet so the Moroccan and Theo could hear and translate what was being said outside.

"They're concerned about the checkpoints," Theo reported.

"Is that Mohammad?" I asked.

"Yes."

A few minutes later one of the jihadis opened the door to check our restraints and noticed mine were loose. He tightened the tie so viciously that the zipper sound echoed through my head. Before long, huge blisters were filling up around the restraints on my wrists.

After what felt like forever, Jamal, Mohammad's right hand, jumped behind the wheel wearing a turquoise jumpsuit jacket. In the passenger seat was a young man I had never seen before. He couldn't have been more than twenty, with a

wavy mop of hair so thick it stood up on its own. I would call him Crop Top.

When we finally started moving, I leaned back and saw that we were part of a huge and heavily armed procession. Directly behind us was Yassine astride a motorcycle with an AK strapped around his neck, and behind him came several trucks and cars packed out with jihadis and a tractor trailer carrying a huge bright-green shipping container on its back. I had no idea at the time, but inside it were prisoners, including all the Alawite POWs who'd been locked up down the hall from us at the hospital. The captives took up about half the space inside the container; the other half was filled by drums of gasoline, some of which were leaking onto the floor and making the air toxic to breathe. The ventilation was like the light: there wasn't any.

It was a long and painful ride. The blisters on my wrists were so sensitive that every bump we hit on the unpaved country roads was agony. The Moroccan and I were seated facing each other with our backs to the walls of the van, but I had placed the blankets under me, which helped a little. We had to keep low or Crop Top would scream at us to get down, but I didn't mind; I'd slid my cap up just enough to see, leaned back, and stared at the sun and the beautiful blue sky. I hadn't seen either one in a long time, and had forgotten how incredible simple things that I had taken for granted back home could be. Before long, I started to recognize the scenery outside our window.

"We're in Hraytan," I said.

"How do you know?" the Moroccan asked—he was still wearing his camouflage blindfold.

"Because we just passed under the blue walking bridge," I told him. "We're on the Gaziantep highway."

Then we turned off into the back roads and I lost my way.

We traveled through one town after another, some with the black flag of Jabhat al-Nusra flying high in the air from flagpoles planted onto rooftops so they could be seen from afar. Between the villages was the countryside, mile upon mile of hills covered in jagged rocks and bleak olive groves. For some reason I found myself thinking of that Louis Armstrong song "What a Wonderful World," playing it in my head as the neatly planted rows of trees rushed past us under the scarce white clouds. Then we got to the first checkpoint, and the music was over.

We pulled right through and then off to the side of the road. The FSA group controlling this checkpoint wasn't interested in what was in our little truck—they

wanted to know what was in the big green shipping container. However, our captors were prepared to blow themselves and everyone else to hell before they would let anyone else get so much as a peek. We heard yelling, and then I saw Mohammad, a suicide belt strapped around his waist, pull out his Glock. By now our escorts had fled the vehicle for the action and Jamal was in a cluster of jihadis, holding Mohammad back so that his gun was forced toward the sky. I don't know who said what to calm the dispute, but within minutes we were all moving again. When I was free, the FSA and al-Nusra were staunch allies, with the FSA being the bigger power, but over the months of my captivity that had drastically changed, with the extremist groups rising to become the tail that wagged the dog.

The second checkpoint we hit went even less smoothly. Jamal sailed right through and pulled off to the side just like the last time, and again the FSA group minding the passageway wanted to see what was in the shipping container. This group was much larger than the last and from the looks of them nothing to fuck with. It didn't take long for a burst of gunfire to ring out, followed by a few seconds of silence and an answering burst. Then all hell broke loose and we heard AKs spraying from all directions within the cluster of vehicles that had accumulated around the truck holding the container.

"They're fighting!" the Moroccan yelled.

"No shit!" I said, grabbing the blankets and pushing them against the wall of the van.

"What are you doing?" he asked, removing his blindfold.

"Putting the blankets against the walls in case any bullets pierce the truck."

"That won't do anything."

"It'll do better than nothing," I said, motioning to what he had next to him.

This was around the time I looked at Theo, who had also removed his blindfold to peer out the window. His eyes were puffy and full of tears, but none slid down his cheeks.

"Hey, I know that guy from Anadan!" the Moroccan shouted suddenly. "He lived next door to my wife! I'm gonna try to escape!"

"Are you fuckin' nuts?" I yelled, grabbing him. "You have a bullet in your leg and as soon as you open the doors they're gonna light up everyone in this truck!"

I swear that lunatic didn't even know the guy. We were an hour and a half from Anadan.

As the fighting continued I locked eyes with an FSA jihadi. His hair was all gelled back and he wore a huge grin on his face. In his hand was an RPG. I held up my wrists to show the hand ties so he'd know we weren't hostiles.

"That guy's going to blow himself up!" the Moroccan yelled, pointing in the opposite direction.

And it looked like he was right. Standing about twenty feet from us in front of the container was one of our escorts in a suicide vest—with his finger on the detonator, ready to blow.

"No, *that* guy is gonna blow *us* up!" I said, and I pointed to the kid holding the RPG as he raised it to his shoulder, his eyes again locked with mine, and in the same motion, turned to point it at the truck carrying the shipping container.

A few very long minutes later the firing stopped, and then a jihadi I had never seen before walked right past our window and screamed "*Allah Akbar*" so loud I could see the vein popping on the side of his head. Then dozens of other fighters started to do the same.

"Someone's dead," the Moroccan said.

"*Allah Akbar!*" jihadis screamed from all directions as Crop Top swung into the passenger seat and a new face jumped behind the wheel and took off.

Al-Nusra had lost two men during the firefight—and they were not happy about it.

I can't be sure, but the ride felt like it was about two and a half hours long. It finally ended after we'd pulled through a fancy concrete arch and up a long driveway. The driver parked and got out. We fixed our blindfolds so as not to get caught peeking, but not before I got a look at several other prisoners in green smocks walking blindfolded toward a large house, some carrying blankets.

A second later the back doors opened and we were ordered from the vehicle. When we went to grab our blankets they told us to leave them and take only our spare clothes. We were led around the side of the massive home to join a group of POWs, all of us then forced through a door and down a few steps into the basement. From what I could see under my cap, at one time it had probably been a beautiful apartment for either guests or the caretaker. The smell of gasoline upon entering was so powerful that at first I thought we were in some kind of bomb-making lab, but it was just the other prisoners. They were soaked in it from the ride.

The first room was empty except for a bunch of construction materials, and

we were ushered down a narrow hallway. The screaming from the guards was intense—they were clearly angry about losing two of their men and taking it out on us. At the end of the hallway was Crop Top, screaming *Yala! Yala!* nonstop and dealing every prisoner an openhanded blow to the back of the neck as they passed through the door into the cell. When it was my turn to get hit I saw stars.

Crop Top was screaming out instructions in Arabic, and I followed the lead of the prisoners before me. Once through the door everyone crowded to the back wall and crouched down. The terror in the air was as thick as the scent of gasoline. It felt like we were awaiting the firing squad. I was still blindfolded and had no idea which other prisoners were in the room aside from Theo and the Moroccan. When the door finally slammed shut and locked there was silence, not a sound except for the heavy breathing of the men. I was the first one to remove my blindfold, and I couldn't have been happier when I saw who was beside me: it was Ali, the English-speaking POW and the first friend I'd made at the hospital. His blindfold was still covering his eyes but fear was written on his face.

“Hey, Ali, what's up?” I said enthusiastically.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“It's Matt! Who do you think it is?”

“We are in danger,” he replied.

That was when I looked around at our new environment and realized it was just another prison.

“Nah, we'll be all right,” I said confidently.

After a while we all removed our blindfolds and began to embrace one another like men who knew they'd just escaped death. Despite the zip ties I was shaking so many hands I felt like the mayor, and for a few minutes the huge blisters that had formed on my wrists ceased to exist; I was once again among friends. We passed the next few hours speculating on where we were and why we'd been brought here. Some thought this was just a temporary holding place because of the trouble at the checkpoint, whereas others thought it was where we'd been heading the whole time, another routine transfer so as not to keep us in any one place for too long.

I knew that this prison was going to be different from all the rest when I heard the prisoners in the cell across from ours. There were two of them and they were women—one never stopped pounding on the door while the other never stopped

crying. The sound of her weeping pierced the heart of pretty much every man in the room until it ended, when the guards came for them later that night. Like all the others that had come and gone and would in the future, we'd never know where they ended up. All we knew for certain was that we never heard them again.

This was our introduction to the House of Mohammad.

We had not seen much of General Mohammad since the electrical institute, and now we learned why. He had been made an emir and given his own militia to command. This villa was one of two that he had either requisitioned from their former owners or simply taken when they fled in the wake of the war.

The cell must have been the apartment's master bedroom, and at one time a set of large French doors had spanned almost the entire twenty-foot length of the room. Now those French doors were a thing of the past, covered with layer upon layer of concrete, spackled on so jaggedly that we hung our spare clothes from the sharp points that protruded. It made for a dim scene. Both the light switch and the fixture had been ripped out, leaving nothing but thin wires snaking out into the air. The only unobstructed windows were set at about eye level, each with two glass doors that opened in and bars on the outside. It was a gray day, and only a dreary light filtered through.

I caught up with old friends and was introduced to the new arrivals among the POWs, one of the most memorable being Pops, a short little dude of around sixty with salt-and-pepper hair and a raspy voice. Once we got to know each other he called me "Mr. Friday." Pops was a total nymphomaniac, and sometimes it seemed like he knew just enough English to talk about sex. I'll never forget what he said to me after we'd introduced ourselves in the fading light of that first afternoon:

"Can you get me a date with Hill-or-ee Cleen-ton?"

For some reason Pops had a real thing for Hillary. One time he crept up behind me and started stroking the top of my head, telling everyone in the room that he bet the skin on my bald head was "as smooth as the skin on Hill-or-ee Cleen-ton's ass."

I also met Senator Iayd Sulaiman, a cool cat of forty who'd held a seat in Bashar's parliament before being kidnapped in Homs. He stood 6'3", with thick curly hair. The Senator was a trip. Here was a man who was accustomed to receiving daily hour-long massages back home and now he was sleeping on the

floor with the rest of us. He spent hours reading the Koran and praying, and later the two of us would have long talks about everything from politics to religion and become close friends in the process. He almost always had one pant leg rolled up over his kneecap, where the bone was covered only by scar tissue. I never asked what had happened because I'd seen enough to know it was the result of being struck repeatedly with a thick cable like the one they'd tortured me with, probably while he was in the tire.

And then there was Fatr, a twenty-five-year-old so fresh faced and innocent looking that he could've been the poster boy for the Syrian Boy Scouts, if such a thing existed. He had thick black hair and a long patchy beard that never came in fully. Looking at him you didn't really think "warrior," but then he took off his shirt and you saw the scars. That kid took five bullets to the chest and abdomen, and still he almost never stopped smiling.

The sight of a bunch of prison guards has never been more welcome than when the door opened and they entered to remove our restraints. I was in so much pain from the ties digging into my flesh that I thought my hands might fall off. They dumped everyone's blankets on the floor in a single pile, and we could tell right away that ours were missing. Our blankets had been the same brown wool as the rest, but my quilt was nowhere to be seen, and before I knew it every blanket in the room had been snatched up and either spread on the floor or used as a cover, leaving me with nothing. Even Theo got one, but he didn't offer to share it with me.

We were now realizing how inadequate the room was for confining so many people. Once lying down, the twenty-three of us were packed so tightly that everyone's legs overlapped, and some inmates—like Theo, and Ammar, who was a Shabiha—got stuck sleeping in the middle between everyone's feet, so that most of the men had to sleep with their legs bent up. On top of having no blanket on a cold night, I was also in the middle at first, lying there curled up to keep warm. Then Rias, my old friend from the hospital, noticed I had no covers. He stood up, handed me his only blanket, and motioned for me to squeeze in between him and another inmate. When I tried to share his blanket with him he waved me off and got under his neighbor's. I was completely overwhelmed with gratitude. We were jammed together so tight that it was impossible to roll over unless the man next to you did the same, and still it was a huge relief to be there, with men who had a deep and unshakeable sense of brotherhood, so different from either Theo's stubborn isolation or the Moroccan's self-serving and ever-

shifting loyalties.

When morning came, sunshine flooded into the room along with the sounds of birds singing. Piled up on the windowsills, which were so deep we could sit on them, were the bowls from dinner the night before. Dangling above them from outside one window was a light that the guards had hung a few hours after it got dark. I was one of the first to awaken and did so with a bladder so full that holding it was not an option. After months of erratic bathroom access and drinking contaminated water, I had some kind of urinary tract infection that resulted in pain whenever my bladder filled up. Unfortunately, there were no soda bottles in the room yet, just a big blue five-gallon water jug we all drank out of. Sensing that this wasn't the type of place where I could knock on the door, I grabbed one of the halawa bowls and whipped it out. A few of the men waking up weren't happy to see me urinating in one of the dishes we ate out of, but there was really nothing I could do about it. When I finished I went to empty the bowl out the window, but several of my cellmates told me to wait for the bathroom run to dump it there, and not wanting to make any more waves, I listened.

Just then the Moroccan woke up, and chose this moment to attempt to demonstrate to the room his nonexistent dominance over me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yelled. “Dump that shit out the window!”

“What? Fuck you!” I bellowed back. “Who the fuck do you think you're talkin' to—Theo?”

I set the bowl on the windowsill while staring him down. It was now game on between America and Morocco in Syria.

It wasn't long into the day when Theo learned how insignificant his little physical therapy sessions and massages were when it came to making an ally out of the Moroccan.

“Hey, Theo, give me massage!” Abdelatif demanded loudly. The whole room watched.

“No, not right now,” said Theo softly.

“What?” the Moroccan asked, surprised.

“I'm not going to help you anymore if you talk to me like that.” It seemed Theo was trying to make an impression on our new cellmates by showing them he had some balls.

Abdelatif's response to Theo's defiance was so swift and conniving that JR Ewing would have tipped his hat to him. First he began by grilling Theo on why he refused to convert to Islam, which won the support of half the men in the room. Then he started in on why Theo knew Arabic so well, which won over the rest, and before Theo knew it he was surrounded by suspicious eyes, all accusing him of being a CIA agent. Theo tried to defend himself, but Abdelatif was just too devious. I'm sure he would have tried the same thing with me if he hadn't realized I was immune to his accusations, as I already knew most of the men in the room better than he did.

The night before, after the lights went on, Theo had been giving a bunch of the men English lessons, but now by nightfall every man in the room had marked him as a spy and class was out. And after all this, he still dropped to his knees that evening to give the Moroccan's leg a massage.

The first time I was locked up with the soldiers, few were very religious, but now they all prayed five times a day without fail, and not only did none of them give me a hard time about my conversion, they embraced it. We would line up in two tight rows to kneel, with one of the men playing the role of imam. My conversion may not have been real, but there was something truly amazing about being so welcomed into the Alawite sect of Islam, them praying to their God, me praying to mine.

Sometimes I'd hear the door open directly next to me as we prayed and the guards would enter. As the imam recited the Koran we would hear the *thud* of their punches and *whack* of their slippers, which they removed and used to smack Theo atop the head over and over again. By the time they were done with the slipper beatings his hair was so caked in dirt and dust that he looked twice as gray and three times as broken as he had before.

On these occasions I would just keep my head down, my eyes closed, and Allah took care of the rest, for I was never once assaulted or harassed in any way during prayer.

On several occasions during the months leading to our transfer I got so frustrated with Theo's stupidity that I yelled at him for not being Austin Tice. Austin was a marine who'd served in Afghanistan and had made it from Turkey all the way down to the outskirts of Damascus before he went missing. From what I knew about him, he was a stand-up guy from a stand-up family. He would have been a

lot more help as a cellmate, and a lot better company.

I was always asking Theo what he was going to tell people when they asked why he'd gone to Syria in the first place, knowing full well that when they found out he'd been kidnapped while trying to drum up a story about a famous kidnapping victim he'd be ridiculed. He never answered the question; just lay there pompously stroking his mustache in a way that told me he had no intention of ever admitting his real motivation for the trip.

But here at the villa, he began crafting an alternative story, telling the soldiers that he'd come to Syria to visit villages and speak to citizens on both sides of the conflict, focusing on the dissent between them. I told him it was delusional to think that would ever fly at home, being that he'd already admitted the real reason, both to me and to Tice's editor, who he'd emailed before he left.

Theo's usual response when I reminded him of this was some belittling comment. I didn't get it, because I'd told him straight up that I would never lie for him. The only thing that ever explained his confidence was something he said once when we were talking about telling our stories back home. "That all depends on your ability to convince people," he'd told me. "I *am* the media."

The first week at the villa was one of the most refreshing I had experienced in captivity. Yes, we were constantly abused and insulted by the guards, but after almost a full month of nobody but Theo and the Moroccan it was worth it to be back with friends. Just like before, I clicked instantly with all the men I had not had the privilege of meeting or getting to know well the last time, especially Rabir and Ayman.

Rabir had a shady look that didn't in any way reflect his personality, with one eye open slightly more than the other and two bullet holes in him, but he was genuinely loved by all due to his warmth and great sense of humor.

"I love you, Matt!" he'd say in English, a big smile on his face.

"I love you too, Rabir!"

Ayman was a grunt, but one who was generally respected by all in the room. He was of average height and build, with one truly stunning feature: his hair. It was so thick that when he ran his fingers through it wet, it stood up in porcupine spikes all around his head. We became friends immediately, thanks to our identically competitive personalities. It began one day when he was sitting across the room and motioned for me to toss him the ball I'd made. I lobbed it gently over. He caught it and *fired* it back at me like he was Roger Clemens. I

was caught off guard and failed to make the catch.

“One,” Ayman said, wearing a smug grin and holding up a finger.

“Oh, you wanna play rough, huh?”

I hurled the ball right back, even harder. We went back and forth like this a few times . . . and then I dropped it again.

“Two,” he said, holding up two fingers with that same grin.

He also liked to give me shit when I was working out—I’d finish a round of push-ups and he’d have someone translate as he told me how meaningless my exercises were and demonstrated how they were done in Syria. The comical and endearing way he joked and competed with me made me love him like a brother from the jump.

Aside from my ability to make everyone laugh, which is no small feat in a prison, my single greatest contribution to the room was the introduction of the ball. It started with me trying to show them how to hack, but since there wasn’t room to move around much, this quickly evolved into something new: hacky sack, Aleppo-style. Instead of standing and using our feet, we sat cross-legged or on our knees and used our hands—and instead of playing civilly, we beat the shit out of each other. Five or six of us sat in a circle, and once the ball was served the object was to keep it in the air and moving at a fast but reasonable pace. There was no spiking or anything like it allowed, and the penalty for fucking up a round was severe. Whoever missed the ball or hit it out of the circle into nowhere had to enter the ring of men to accept his punishment: a solid punch to either the back or the shoulder from every player, hard enough that they sometimes produced *thuds* that made everyone in the room wince and say “*Oh!*” before laughing at the loser.

Intense rivalries formed, like the ones between me and Rias—who would throw fits when he lost—and me and Rabir, who just reveled in hurting me. Rabir may have loved me when we weren’t hacking, but when we were, it was total war. One time after I blew a round I entered the ring for my punishment and Rabir waited until everyone else was done dealing me my licks to take his turn. As I crouched down, knees and elbows to the ground in the customary position, Rabir pretended to spit shine his fist, as if he was about to deliver a blow so epic it would shake the villa.

“Come on, already!” I yelled.

As Rabir wound up, I put my head down and shut my eyes tight, just waiting

for him to sock the same goddamn spot he had been pounding on the whole game, but nothing happened. I looked up, thinking maybe he wanted me to see it coming, and I was right—as his fist started down I braced myself for the impact and saw the massive ball of knuckles coming straight for my face . . . only to stop dead an inch from my eyes. Then Rabir placed his fists side by side and cranked his middle finger up until it was staring me right in the face. We all laughed like we were in grade school again and he spared me with a tap to the shoulder.

The game was so addictive that sometimes there was a waiting list to get in on the action. Even the brass would play, though if they ended up in the middle nobody ever gave them more than a pat. I invited Theo to play several times, but he always declined, even when I promised that nobody would hurt him.

“No, I’m not going to play if you’re going to hit me,” he snapped.

Once the rivalries started heating up you’d see some of us walking around the room rubbing our bruised-to-the-bone arms and shoulders—we were beating each other worse than the guards were. Leave it to the Syrian Army to turn hacky sack into a full-contact sport.

All of our clothes were in tatters so one of the men asked a guard to bring us a needle and thread. Surprisingly, he delivered, which was great for me because I had a rip in my pants that ran from the crotch all the way down the seam of the left leg. My only problem was that I didn’t know how to sew, but luckily one of the soldiers did, and later that same day after he fixed my pants he tossed me my ball with a sock sewn tightly around it. Our games were frequently interrupted by ball malfunctions, specifically the need to rewind the shoelace; now that would never happen again. And our new, sturdier equipment made it possible for us to evolve from playing full-contact hacky sack to one-on-one volleyball.

I don’t know whose idea it was, but one night I looked up to see Rias and another inmate on their knees, each holding one end of a blanket that stretched from one side of the room to the other, while two prisoners, also kneeling, volleyed the ball back and forth over the top. The Syrian people are definitely the most competitive I have ever met in my life, and within minutes they were playing for points and everyone was lining up to play the winner. Unlike our Aleppo-style hacky sack, this game involved no corporal punishment, but that didn’t stop the men from fighting or throwing temper tantrums when they lost. Eventually the arguing got so bad that Rabir took the title of referee, standing over every game as if perched on a high chair like a tennis umpire.

The rules of the tournament were simple: the first man to reach five points won and moved on to the next round. As in hacky sack there was no spiking, otherwise no game would have lasted longer than three seconds, and also as in hacky sack, intense rivalries formed between the players. Mine was with Hassan, whose gaunt frame and protruding cheekbones led some of the men to call him “the human skeleton.” Every time I played him, he scored on me with the same dinky-ass move, and every game started out the same way, with me staring at him from one side of the net like a gunslinger at high noon, and him staring back with a big grin that said: *I’m about to school your ass in front of the whole room, son.*

The winner of our first tournament was Rabir, and upon beating the runner-up he rose like a phoenix with his arms held high in triumph and was immediately surrounded as nearly every man in the room stormed the court. As someone lifted one of Rabir’s arms up to declare him the victor, Fatr handed him an empty two-liter soda bottle as if it were the Stanley Cup. Rabir thrust the bottle proudly into the air as everyone hollered, and for a moment our cell resembled a baseball field after a World Series victory. We’d have many tournaments, but no other moments quite like this one, where for a few precious minutes we all forgot we were prisoners.

They came for them at night. There was no warning, no light, and no goodbyes—only the voice of a guard telling Pops and the Shabiha to get up and follow him. We never saw either one of them again, and were never told their fate, but we all knew that they had most likely been executed. The Senator had been in the boiler room at the hospital when the Shabiha’s confession was forced from him and said there was no way in hell he’d ever be released given what he’d admitted to.

Earlier that evening, Pops had led everyone in prayer, reciting the Koran in the same fading light in which I’d met him. It was a moment of pure beauty, and I remember so clearly sitting there watching him as he sat cross-legged, the prayer flowing out of him in his raspy voice. We all missed him, just like I’m sure his family did.

The bathroom was up the hall from our cell and had a regular toilet like the ones we use in the West. Unfortunately, it did not flush. There were over twenty of us sharing this one toilet, and during our first days there the bowl filled up so fast

that by the time it was my turn people had already begun to shit in the bidet. I'd breathe through my mouth to avoid the smell but the air was so moist and putrid I could almost taste it. Twice a day prisoners were taken from the cell for dish duty upstairs, and I assumed they were the ones burdened with emptying the toilet.

There was a hose in the wall, but it rarely worked, and so instead we had another blue five-gallon jug of water and a plastic cup. A prisoner had sixty seconds to shit, wash his rear out with cups of water and his finger, and then wash his hands—if we were lucky enough to have soap, which we often weren't. Needless to say, this was not enough time for my pampered American ass, and it was not uncommon to hear the guard—usually Abu Ali—screaming at me to hurry up as I hovered above the feces-filled bowl, trying to get myself clean. Abu Ali was in his midtwenties, with a pencil-thin mustache and a fierce hatred for every prisoner he watched over. Usually—when my game went into overtime, so to speak—Abu Ali's response was to zap me on my ass with his Taser as I reentered the cell, but as far as I was concerned I would rather take a Tase than sit around filthy all day. One time, however, I must have pissed him off more than usual, because instead of just zapping me, he put me in one of the punishment cells.

The punishment cells had not yet been constructed when we arrived, but we heard them being built with the supplies we'd passed on the way in. There were three of them, basically lockers for human beings with cinder-block walls and tall black steel doors. When I was locked inside the first thing I noticed was the cold; it was freezing in there. It was also completely dark, the only light that crept in was through a peephole drilled in the door and the cracks in the wall. To maximize suffering and discomfort, a cinder block was cemented directly in the middle of the floor, making it impossible to stretch out when sitting down. I was only in there for a minute and that was long enough by far. Luckily for me, Yassine was present on this bathroom run and by now had total authority over punks like Abu Ali and Crop Top; he ordered them to let me out, and after a little arguing they did as they were told. When I emerged, Yassine gave me a pat on the shoulder and led me back to the cell.

Hunger was another form of torture at the villa, and outside our barred windows we could hear the jihadis swimming in the pool and laughing as we starved. Usually we were given a breakfast of halawa and bread around 1 PM, but sometimes breakfast never came and we had to wait until dinner, which was

brought late in the evening, to eat at all. On those days, some of the longest of my life, we were quiet except for our stomachs, which never stopped talking. No one had the energy to do anything but wait to be fed.

We dined in groups. Theo refused to eat with Abdelatif due to the brush with death he'd had after eating off the wrong side of the bowl back at the hospital, so he decided to sit with the brass. The brass, however, were disgusted by Theo's presence because of the open sores that had formed on every inch of his body except his face from scratching his bedbug bites. The men in his group approached me, pointing at him and then scratching their arms and pretending to eat, to show me how unsanitary it was to dine with him, so before every meal I began calling Theo over to the window to wash up as best he could. I remember feeling pity as he held his hands through the bars while I poured water over them from a soda bottle. He was like a child, completely incapable of taking care of himself. After he was done, I would rinse my own hands and join my group.

As time went on, the Moroccan's attitude toward Theo and me grew more and more hostile. Unlike Theo I refused to take his shit for even one second, which led to frequent arguments, and twice these arguments turned physical. The first time this happened I resorted to a tactic I'd used once before, when we got into an altercation over the Koran back at the hospital. It was three days after I'd converted, and Abdelatif was angry that I hadn't yet memorized any of the prayers in Arabic, so he confiscated my Koran until I lived up to his expectations. When I grabbed it back he lunged at me in a rage, so I just rolled onto his broken leg and that ended it, with the book back in my hands. When I did the same thing during our brawl at the villa he shrieked in pain and the men quickly broke it up. That's how our first fight ended, but I honestly don't remember how it started.

Our second fight, however, I remember vividly. It began late at night, when everyone was sleeping except for me, Abdelatif, Rabir, Ayman, and Fadaar.

"Hey, Nassir," the Moroccan said, grabbing the thick part of his forearm to illustrate how well-endowed he was. "When we get out of here I'm going to give it to your sister."

Now this was a kind of disrespect I could not stand for, especially with others listening, so I gave it back as good as I got it and made a similar remark about his sister.

"*What?*" he yelled, struggling to his feet. "You can't say that about my sister! She wears a veil!"

“Well, if you don’t like it, don’t talk shit about my sister.”

“It’s not the same thing!” he said, and his open hand connected with the side of my face.

The slap turned my head but it snapped right back into place, followed by an open hand of my own, which landed with a smack across Abdelatif’s jaw. Within seconds, every man in the room was awake and Rabir and Ayman were holding me back as another group did the same with the Moroccan, who was going absolutely ballistic.

“I’m a Muslim!” he screamed. “He can’t say that about my sister! Just wait! Wait until the guards come!”

“Go ahead!” I bellowed back.

Usually when our arguments escalated like this they deescalated just as fast. “Jumu’ah!” the Senator would yell, grabbing my arm. “Sit down and be quiet!” And I would, for the good of the room. But this time, the Moroccan and I were still riled up the next day, with him constantly barking the same threat: that he’d tell the guards I was a Jewish CIA agent sent there to spy on them.

“Go ahead, Kawa already knows who I am,” I responded every time, calling his bluff. “You tell him lies and he’s just gonna torture you.”

When Oqba called me over, I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth. He wanted me to apologize to Abdelatif, to make peace in the room and relieve the tension.

“Do it for me, please? Do it for me?” he asked in his sweet voice.

“No, fuck him! He talked shit about my sister first!” I replied.

“You don’t understand, in this part of the world when you talk about someone’s sister, or mother, or father . . . it’s blood.”

“And you think we just let that shit slide in America?” I asked, incredulous, but out of respect I heard him out and afterward I went over to that psychotic son of a bitch and made peace.

I felt nothing but disgust as his repugnant ass hugged me and said he was sorry. As I returned the hug I rolled my eyes over his shoulder, so every man in the room could see that I was completely full of shit.

After that first day at the villa I don’t remember Theo ever refusing a request from Abdelatif; he was massaging him so many times a day I would have needed two hands to keep track.

“Theo, come! Come give me a massage!” the Moroccan would shout, and it

didn't matter if Theo was asleep or giving an English lesson, he'd go running.

The worst part was the way he gave the massages, dropping to his knees as if before a caliph, placing Abdelatif's leg upon his shoulder as the Moroccan lay smirking with his arms outstretched on the floor. We were in a room full of soldiers; the symbolism of this was undeniable and noticed by every man in the room. More times than I can count men would look from this spectacle back to me with their arms out in disbelief, as if waiting for an explanation of how an American could so readily kneel before a member of al-Qaeda, his country's greatest enemy. This didn't help things between Theo and me, because he wasn't only humiliating himself by doing this, he was humiliating America, which was definitely the Moroccan's goal—making us look so pitiful and weak that anyone who survived would grow old telling their grandchildren that this was how Americans acted without their military around to back them up. It made my life twice as difficult because I had to stand twice as tall whenever I was tested by another prisoner, to prove that not all of us bleed pink like Theo.

The Alawites knelt in prayer five times a day, which meant Theo was now kneeling before al-Qaeda more often than they were kneeling before God. I didn't know who I hated most for this, the Moroccan or Theo.

The one time Theo *did* refuse a request, it came from me—and it wasn't for a massage. The guards were feeling particularly vicious that day, and we were being treated worse than the sheep we heard them keeping in the room next door, where the punishment cells were. That morning Crop Top asked who had to take a shit and only those who raised their hands were permitted to go on the bathroom run. Everyone else, those who only had to take a piss, were forced to use the bottle that had been brought just for me because of my urinary tract infection. By nighttime it was completely filled with pungent yellow fluid.

When Crop Top and Abu Ali returned in the evening for our second and final bathroom break of the day, they were still on their sadistic streak, with the sound of Abu Ali's Taser snapping out and Crop Top blessing everyone with his signature smack to the back of the neck. Knowing that both Abu Ali and Crop Top took particular pleasure in making me suffer, I decided to skip this run since I didn't have to go anyway. The only problem was the piss bottle and who was going to empty it. I turned to Theo, who was already lined up to go on the run.

"Theo, can you empty the bottle for me?" I asked, as the sounds of blows and Tasers echoed in from the hallway as the men started down. "I don't wanna go out there tonight."

“No,” he replied coldly.

“Why not?” I asked. He was going anyway, and he’d emptied the Moroccan’s bottle every day at the hospital. “You want me to go out there and get Tased and stomped?”

“Yes.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you deserve it.”

It took me a second to absorb this. I looked at him, sitting there rocking back and forth, staring at the ground with a blank expression. Then I dealt him a solid slap across the face, which set off a commotion in the room, given the proximity of the guards.

“Jumu’ah!” I heard from all directions as the men pointed toward the open door.

“What’s going on over there?” piped the Moroccan.

“I asked Theo to empty the bottle and he said no because he wants me to go outside and get stomped and Tased!” I said, enraged.

“Theo, empty the fucking bottle!” the Moroccan shouted.

“Fine!”

“Oh, so you’ll empty the bottle for al-Qaeda, but not for me?” I said, disgusted.

The feeling of being betrayed by one of my own left me consumed with anger; at that moment I could happily have beaten Theo within an inch of his life. Sometimes I was jealous of the POWs, who were locked up with others they shared a bond of culture and country with—they had something bigger than themselves that connected them and kept them strong. The fact that Theo and I were both Americans meant something to me. I wanted it to mean something to him, but it didn’t and never would.

Crop Top’s malicious behavior toward the Alawites reached an all-time low one day when he came downstairs just to confiscate all of the Korans in the room. There were about six in total—including mine, which Yassine had returned to me as promised after we were transferred—and every one of them was taken. This was a huge blow to the men and sent a wave of devastation through the room, as every man there spent time reading the sacred book, some of them hours upon hours. When Yassine joined Crop Top and Abu Ali outside our door, I started complaining as soon as we made eye contact.

“Yassine, he took my Koran!” I said. “The one *you* came down here to give me after we left the last place!”

Yassine pulled my Koran swiftly from Crop Top’s grasp and handed it down to me with both hands where I sat on the floor. Crop Top tried to say something, but Yassine cut him off.

“Jumu’ah, this is yours!” he said, so his voice carried through the room. “Do not give it to *anyone!*” The way he said it, I could have sworn he didn’t just mean the other prisoners, he meant Crop Top, too.

After the door closed we could hear Crop Top still arguing with Yassine’s decision, but he got nowhere and they moved off down the hall. I sat there wide-eyed with disbelief at what had just happened. All the actual Muslims had their sacred texts confiscated, while one jihadi overruled another to allow probably the only Jew in the entire country to keep the only Koran in the entire room. *My God*, I thought to myself, *Larry David couldn’t make this shit up.*

“Kawa’s dead!” someone said.

It was during a bathroom break; one of the men had learned of Kawa’s fate from a guard.

“What? He’s dead?” I asked eagerly.

“Yes, he was killed at a checkpoint when he wouldn’t let them search his car,” a soldier answered.

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “Yes! This is great news! You hear that?” I asked Theo, patting him on the back.

“Yeah,” he said, without emotion.

I was so jubilant that my friends had to warn me to keep it down so the guards wouldn’t hear. Kawa’s death gave me hope: Everyone in the room knew he had a hard-on for me and Theo and loved having us in his custody like little American trophies. Now we had a chance of getting someone else put in charge of our fates, and I had something new to pray for—surely there had to be one reasonable soul in this cursed fucking organization.

In spite of underfeeding, death, torture, and general horror, there were moments I remember with something almost like bliss, like when we all saw a full moon for the first time since being taken prisoner. Because my sleeping spot faced the window I had a clear line of sight, and some of the men who didn’t would come and sit by my feet, staring through the bars as they were bathed in moonlight.

Syria has some of the most beautiful and clear night skies I have ever seen. I had forgotten all about that since being kidnapped.

On another night I heard Oqba's voice calling me over.

"What's up?" I asked, kneeling next to him in the dark.

"Come here," he said warmly. "Come lie next to me and tell me all about *New York!*"

He said "*New York!*" with such excitement that it made me smile. I lay down next to him and we put our arms around each other's shoulders like we were at camp, staring into the blackness as I told him all about Times Square, Yankee Stadium, Madison Square Garden, Central Park, the East Village, and all the other places I'd seen and been fortunate enough to grow up thirty miles away from. After I got through this list I started in on the places I only wished I'd had a chance to see, like Carnegie Hall and the Statue of Liberty. I talked for hours about New York, until Oqba was dozing off like a child and I left him to get some sleep.

I went to bed that night feeling lighter, thinking, *Maybe I'll get a chance to see those places yet.*

It was at the villa that I first began making an effort to learn some prayers in Arabic, starting with the most important, the *Fatiha*. I'd requested a pencil or pen at the hospital to help me learn but was told it was forbidden. Being that our treatment was a hundred times worse at the villa, I didn't even bother to ask, and set out to learn by memory alone. The men who helped me the most were Ali and Oqba—deep down they knew I was faking it, but they never once held that against me. Instead they seemed to love teaching me about Islam and the Alawite sect in particular. I will never forget the first time I heard Oqba admit to being a member.

"We are Alawite," he said, a gleam in his eye. He stated it with such pride that I could feel it in the air.

That night he told me all about his people; how they lived side by side with Christians in their cities on the coast and even celebrated Christmas with them, because Jesus was one of their prophets as well. What bothered him most was that they were portrayed in America as the enemy because of their government's actions.

"I don't want to kill *anybody*," Oqba would say, again and again.

All he wanted was to go home to his two little girls, who he'd finally opened

up to me about, and who I often saw him thinking of with tears in his eyes.

I never really felt lonely when I was with the soldiers, but I always felt homesick. At first when we prayed, I'd say "There's no place like home" instead of "*Allah Akbar*" and the four other sacred phrases, running the *mesbahahs* we had made out of knotted fabric through our hands to keep track of how many times we'd said each, but in time, out of respect for my friends, I stopped and began saying the prayers correctly. I also prayed, hard, for my freedom, and to see my family again soon. I prayed for our captors to judge us fairly and release us with only a warning to never come back. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed, but none of my prayers were ever answered.

Instead, they moved us again.

THE STORES

MAY 5, 2013

As always, there was no warning. The door opened and Crop Top, sounding unusually civil, made an announcement in Arabic. I didn't understand him, of course, but I could tell from the reaction that it was good news.

"He said we're all going home!" the Moroccan bellowed.

"Us too?" I asked, confused, knowing that kidnapped Americans were not exactly in the same boat as the POWs.

"He said everybody!"

And before I knew it everyone was hugging and kissing and celebrating like it was V-Day. In order to keep morale up I went with the flow, but when they started taking us from the room in groups, I brought all my spare clothes with me just in case. Not waiting for me, Theo jumped in with the first set to leave the room.

Because it was so hot, I had retired the ski cap blindfold and replaced it with the sleeve of my tee shirt; when it was stretched out around my head I could see almost everything through the cloudy green fog it created. Outside, there were jihadis everywhere, all of them armed to the teeth. As I walked on at the end of the line, the Moroccan and I were separated from the group and told to stand off to the side where Theo was waiting for us. This was when I heard the voice and laughter of General Mohammad, who was walking over with his camp.

"Jumu'ahhhh!" he said, like it was old times.

"What's up, General?" I replied.

After a friendly exchange we were told to follow one of the jihadis to a vehicle. I shook General Mohammad's hand, kissing both of his cheeks and then his shoulder as custom demanded—he jumped back, laughing, because he was wearing his suicide belt.

I never saw him again.

The three of us were loaded into the back of an SUV, as usual. The ride started out rough, with the jihadis quizzing the Moroccan about what medication he would prescribe for high blood pressure and accusing us of being spies, but for some reason I had a good feeling about where we were going. The ride would have been perfect, with the cool breeze hitting my face as I thought of freedom, except that Theo started to absolutely lose his shit. He was sure we were on our way to be executed, and about fifteen minutes in he started to panic.

“Sick! Sick!” he cried out in Arabic. “Pull over!”

I heard him struggling to keep down vomit.

“Swallow it, dog!” barked one of the jihadis.

“Don’t do it!” another jihadi yelled, sliding back the action on his AK for emphasis.

Now the Moroccan and I were yelling at Theo along with everyone else, but he couldn’t hold it down and puked all over himself.

We rode up what looked like a highway for about an hour. Then I heard the bustling streets around us and knew that we were back in Aleppo.

As soon as my feet touched the pavement, someone took my arm and gently led me into a building and through several rooms. Upon entering one there was a step, and when I purposely bumped into it so as not to let on that I could see through my blindfold, he lightly tapped my leg and led me over the step and into a crowded cell. Inside were the soldiers, hunched down and crowded toward the back just as they’d been when we arrived at the villa. When the door closed I immediately lifted my blindfold and looked around. Over my shoulder I saw three little dark-skinned men sitting on a thick mattress: Shabiha. One by one the other men began to remove their blindfolds as well.

My plastic ties were bound around my forearms this time so I was able to slide them down to my wrists where they were so loose I could move almost freely. The first thing I did was help Ayman loosen his restraints by sliding his jacket sleeves out from under the ties, pulling on the fabric with my teeth. Then I switched into patriot mode and moved on to Theo. His hands were bound behind his back so tightly it looked like the circulation had been completely cut off.

“What are you doing?” the Moroccan snapped. “Sit down!”

“I gotta try and help Theo,” I said, crawling over to him.

By now he was lying on his side in agony, his shirt and beard soaked with vomit from the ride. I thought I might be able to loosen the zip tie by sliding the

pointed end of mine into the lock on his. After we were cut loose at the villa I'd examined the thin piece of plastic that had the grip of a python, trying to figure out how to get it off another prisoner should an opportunity ever arise. Now was a perfect time to put this to the test.

"Okay, I'm gonna try and loosen it for you," I whispered, so the guards outside wouldn't hear me.

As soon as I slid the pointed end of the tie in to work my magic, Theo's tie tightened by one click.

"*Ahh!*" he yelled. "Get away from me! Get away from me!"

I felt truly awful, and apologized profusely. On the other hand, I was always taught that it's the thought that counts.

The lights went out not long after our arrival, but almost as soon as the darkness descended, a huge rechargeable fluorescent illuminated the room like a rescue flare. It was one of the Shabiha, and a few minutes later Shabiha Ali, their unspoken leader, picked up their water bottle and walked around giving each of us a much-needed mouthful to relieve our thirst.

After a short while the electricity came back on and we heard movement outside our door, sending everyone scrambling to put their blindfolds back on. A large, soft-spoken jihadi entered, holding a giant kitchen knife, which he used to loosen and remove our restraints without cutting them. *So that's how you do it*, I thought. I had never seen him before.

As we were freed we all instinctively lined the walls, leaving the center of the cell clear. We were told that the emir was on his way to see us and asked if we needed the bathroom.

One by one we were taken from the cell to relieve ourselves. There was no yelling, there was no hitting, and no one rushed us. When my turn came I walked to the door and stopped in front of a guard holding an AK-47. As he reached up to my blindfold my heart jumped—I thought he could tell that I could see through the cloth—but he was only raising it. I slowly opened my eyes to see a very good-looking young man with light-brown hair and beard wearing a skullcap with black cargo pants and an Armani Exchange tee shirt. He looked at me with a raised brow over kind eyes that said: *If you don't give me any problems, I will not give you any*. He was Abu Obeida, and he ran shit in this jail.

The cell we were in looked like a small bodega, the kind you'd see in

Brooklyn or Manhattan back home. In the front was a solid steel gate that had been pulled down and locked on the outside with a padlock. Inside, the room was about twenty-five feet long and nine feet wide. The door of the cell, the one we used to go in and out to the bathroom, had not been there during peacetime: they had smashed through the wall between our cell and the space next to it and bolted a metal door into the resulting hole. The door was not solid, instead it was the kind you might see being used instead of a screen door in a bad neighborhood, with a slot above it to hand things through. Covering the iron curlicues that served as bars was a thin sheet of cloudy plastic, with a peephole cut into it above the doorknob.

As I made my way out with Obeida, I saw that several other rebels stood outside along the path from the cell to the bathroom. They kept their AKs pointed at us the whole way. These men were a far cry from the kids who had taken us to the bathroom in previous jails. These were some real-deal jihadis, all with long, thick beards and the scent of the front lines on their clothes. The room next to ours was cluttered with everything from furniture to gun parts, with cinder blocks stacked to the ceiling. In the room next to that was the bathroom and an enormous pile of clothing. There was also a stack of wooden crates, ten feet high, and next to these was a huge military trunk overflowing with guns.

This was the first time in almost a month we'd been able to use the bathroom without being screamed at to hurry up, and it was more than an hour before we had all finished. At one point a jihadi entered the cell and screamed at us to face the wall, but almost immediately Obeida appeared and warned him not to do it again.

My positive feeling upon leaving the villa had been justified. It may not have been freedom, but for now we were in a much better place.

When the emir entered he had our full attention from the moment his shiny black shoes touched the floor. He was about forty-five, with dark skin, jet-black hair, and a long, thick, but neatly trimmed beard. He was wearing a blue-and-white pinstriped dress shirt with black dress pants. This emir was unlike any of the others we had seen during our confinement, most of whom were young thugs who wore suicide belts as fashion accessories. He was professional, and so were the men under him.

After looking around the room, he told the big guy who'd taken off our hand ties to go get us sandwiches. He then calmly insulted the men after telling them that their army had committed an atrocity elsewhere in the country that left many

women and children dead. As he was leaving I got his attention and asked for a soda bottle to piss in. The emir gave his consent and a bottle was promptly delivered to me by one of the other jihadis.

A little while later the big soft-spoken jihadi returned, with two huge bags containing our dinner. There was a sandwich for each man in the room and every one was hot and fresh from the shop. These sandwiches aren't like the ones we eat in the West, more like burritos filled with potatoes, peppers, and some kind of sauce. You'd think we'd tear into them like wild beasts after being tortured with hunger for twenty-three days at the villa, but we didn't. We carefully unwrapped our sandwiches and bit into them slowly, savoring every bite we took. This went for pretty much everyone except the Moroccan, who scarfed his down in less than two minutes.

"Man, I'm still hungry! Watch this!" he said to me, a now-familiar evil smile on his face. "Theo, come here!"

Theo jumped up and within seconds was crouched before Abdelatif.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Can I get some of your sandwich?"

"Didn't you get one?" Theo asked, knowing damn well what was coming next.

"Yeah, but I'm still hungry," said the Moroccan.

Silence ensued as they stared at each other.

"Do you want a piece of mine?"

And that was how Abdelatif snagged himself a quarter of Theo's dinner, the best one he'd had since being kidnapped, without so much as a threat. It was the kind of thing I usually would have spoken up about, but ever since that little stunt Theo pulled during the bathroom run back at the villa, I figured he was pretty much on his own when it came to the Moroccan.

We were given blankets, but as at the villa there were not enough. Once the entire floor was covered, except for the space immediately in front of the door, there were a limited number left to cover up with, and the Moroccan and I had to share. At first Theo didn't get one at all, but when the guard noticed, he left and came back, bringing him both a blanket and a flat foam pillow with a SpongeBob SquarePants pillow-case. When it came time for us to go to sleep, it was a tight fit, with everyone's feet overlapping those of the men sleeping opposite. Theo got stuck in front of the door with no blankets beneath him and

had to fold his and curl up inside it to avoid sleeping on the concrete. Because this was the only area not covered, it became the place where everyone shook their blankets off and would get particularly dirty, but by now that didn't matter to Theo.

Obviously, none of us were looking Rico Suave at the moment, but Theo's appearance was the worst by far. He only had one pair of pants and one tee shirt, originally white, but now so far past the yellow stage that it had turned a light gray. All of his other clothes had been stolen by the other prisoners at the villa after the jihadis did a wash and then dumped everything in a pile for us to go through. Here he'd walk around the cell with his tee shirt tucked into his boxer shorts in an attempt to thwart the bedbugs, SpongeBob pillow tucked under his arm for safekeeping. Some of the men began to call him a *kalb*, which meant dog, and one day I accidentally nicknamed him Scrappy because he really did resemble a stray. The name didn't stick for long, but it was funny as shit watching the Moroccan use it whenever he wanted a massage.

"Hey, Scrappy!" he'd call, and then whistle, snapping his fingers. "Come here, boy!"

I knew it was insensitive, but it was hard not to laugh when his flea-ridden ass actually came running over, looking like Old Yeller after he'd been bitten, in a hurry to obey his master's every command.

When I awoke on our first morning in the stores, the room was filled with a yellow glow from the sun reflecting off the stone wall of the neighboring building and in through the bars to our cell. A few hours later we were each given a piece of bread and a hard-boiled egg, which would have constituted a feast at the villa.

Shortly after breakfast we got our first glimpse of the Wolfman, a jihadi whose appearance made our blood run cold. He was not a large man, standing about 5'9" with an average build, wearing a pine-green Adidas knockoff jumpsuit. His hair, which he kept pushed back, was wavy and very long, but this wasn't his defining feature. His defining feature was his beard, which was a sight to behold, growing well down his chest and covering nearly his whole face, springing thick and bushy from right below his eyes. When he walked in nobody looked at the wall; instead we all stared at him in awe as he stepped to the Shabiha, sized them up without saying a word, and then left the room as silently as he had entered it.

"He looks like he's ready to blow himself up, man," the Moroccan whispered

in my ear.

A minute later the emir arrived, with three men—visitors. After looking us over they walked up to the Shabiha, who were sitting by their mattress. As the emir looked down on them he began to roll up his sleeves. Shabiha Ali and his little friend stared steadily down at the Korans open in front of them as if they were the only people in the room. Then the emir said something in Arabic and the little one looked up and handed him the Koran. The emir passed it to one of his friends, and that's when the show began.

Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!

The emir's hand colliding with the little Shabiha's face made a sound so loud it barely sounded real, like something out of a seventies porno flick. Defenseless, he had no choice but to sit there and take the blows as they came, one after another after another.

“Holy shit!” I whispered in the Moroccan's ear. “I've never heard slaps like that in my life! No wonder he doesn't have any wrinkles in his clothes.”

When the emir was done he turned his attention toward the third Shabiha, but one of the emir's friends, who was wearing an untucked purple dress shirt, grabbed him by the arm and yelled something in Arabic.

“They're fighting over who's going to get to hit him!” the Moroccan said. “He's saying, ‘No! No, this one is mine!’”

The emir politely stepped aside and let his buddy go to work. The slaps were the same, the only difference was that this guy didn't bother rolling up his sleeves. As for Shabiha Ali, who never once looked up from his Koran, they left him alone, and when the man in purple was finished they all left the room. Not one of us said a word and a few seconds later we heard somebody coming back and the emir's voice calling to the little Shabiha. Face full of dread, the Shabiha slowly got up and made his way to the door, shaking. We all sat tense with anticipation as he stood there, waiting for it to open . . . then the emir slipped the Koran he'd taken through the slot above the door.

“He's giving him back the Koran,” said Abdelatif. “We're with good Muslims now.”

Later that day Obeida paid us a visit with one of his friends, a skinny jihadi with dark skin and an especially long beard. Upon hearing that I'd recently converted to Islam they both lit up, and when I kicked the *Fatiha* for them they couldn't have been more pleased. By now I had it down pat from studying with the guys

and practicing before sleep every night.

It was during another, similar exchange that Theo tried to make me think they were going to kill me. As the Moroccan went back and forth with Obeida, he suddenly threw in a question as if it were from us.

“He asked him if they’re going to kill us because we are really scared,” said Theo.

“What’d he say?”

“Maybe,” Theo answered.

I turned to Ali for confirmation, but before he could expose the lie, Theo decided to come clean.

“No, no, he said no.”

“No? Then why’d you tell me maybe?” I asked, pissed.

“I got confused.”

That was his excuse. Someone who spoke fluent Arabic confused “maybe” and “no” when it came to a question of life or death. This wasn’t the first time Theo had used my lack of Arabic to try to make me think someone had said they were going to kill me when they’d actually said something else entirely. I didn’t really get that mad or go nuts after Obeida left like you’d think. I mainly just wondered what kind of human being does something like that to another, let alone one of his own.

Later that day Oqba told me that we were no longer in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra. We were now being held in trust for them by Ahrar al-Sham, another incredibly powerful rebel group.

After the sun went down, Obeida came in and told Theo and me that we were not in the same boat as everyone else and that they were going to launch an investigation into us, starting that night. An investigation would mean questioning, and after he left, the Moroccan told me that he no longer wanted to act as my translator. He said he wanted to distance himself from being lumped in with the Americans, which I totally understood. However, he got pushback from the place he least expected it.

“I don’t want to translate for him,” Theo said bluntly.

I just shook my head at his treachery. Abdelatif quickly went from mad to furious as Theo continued to refuse, because he wasn’t only creating a dangerous situation for me, but for him as well. As he got angrier and angrier, a cold and

sinister look came over his eyes.

Crack!

It happened so fast I didn't see it coming. With the knuckles of his pointer and middle fingers jutting from his fist, Abdelatif punched Theo in the face, just below his eye. A second later, little drops of blood began to run down his cheek like tears. He crouched there, shaking with what looked more like humiliation than fear. The rest of the men were disgusted by this violence, but I admit I felt mostly satisfaction. Leave it to Theo to provoke a terrorist to punch him in my defense.

"That's Karma for you," I said, as footsteps approached. "Wipe your eye."

The door opened and I was taken out for interrogation, with the Moroccan acting as my translator.

The shelling began at dinner a few nights later. Each group had a huge metal tray piled with a steaming mountain of brown rice. I said the *Bismillah* and then ripped off a big piece of bread, using it to pinch up a mouthful.

Before I swallowed we heard a sharp whistle, followed by a huge explosion less than a second later. The shell had landed maybe a hundred yards away and caused a near panic in the room. One of the soldiers jumped to his feet with fear on his face and walked to the back wall, and within seconds we had all followed his lead. A few minutes later we heard another whistle and looked up, waiting to see if this one would land on us.

Crash!

This explosion could not have been more than fifty yards from our cell and was followed by something awful, the screaming of a man on his way to paradise. His shrieking paralyzed the room, though it didn't last long. Not one of us ate a bite until the suffering expired.

The rest of the night was quiet.

Ever since we'd arrived at Obeida's, Theo had been trying to make chess pieces out of the flat Styrofoam trays we sometimes ate from, or the paper wrappings from sandwich night, but somehow it never seemed to work—until one day, when every tray came wrapped in aluminum foil. When everyone was finished eating and only the trays remained, I watched as Theo ripped off a piece of foil. From the look on his face you would have thought he'd just discovered fire.

"You should use that for your chess pieces," I said with a smile, but he was

way ahead of me.

Within a few hours one of the soldiers had sculpted all the pieces from the foil and another had made a perfectly symmetrical board on a white sheet with one of the pens we'd kept from writing our reports after the interrogations. By nightfall, Fadaar and some of the other men had made another game as well, using the leftover foil and a piece of foam. The game was called Mancala, and it was something the men loved to teach me to play and completely whip my ass at while doing so.

As for chess, I had never really learned to play, but prison seemed like a great time to pick it up. The only problem was that I was the only beginner in the room, with the exception of the Moroccan, which meant I had to take some serious shit as I was learning. One of my favorite people to play with was Shareef—the officer who'd been shot through the hand and loved Jennifer Lopez—though he certainly never took it easy on me.

“Wait a minute, did you just fuckin' win?” I asked, staring at the board we had just finished setting up not two minutes earlier.

When I looked up, Shareef was wearing an enormous smile, holding up three of his fingers.

“Three!” he said.

“I can't believe you just beat me in three moves,” I said, pissed.

“My turn, Jumu'ah,” said Ayman, tapping my arm to tell me to step aside.

“No, fuck that! I'm playing again! I've been sitting here for two hours waiting for my turn!” As I reset the board, word of my humiliating defeat spread throughout the room—along with a wave of laughter that accompanied it.

Since the Moroccan didn't know how to play either I decided to practice by kicking his al-Qaeda ass. He'd sit there playing with a disinterested look on his face, acting like he didn't care when he clearly did. After about a week of doing this and being schooled by Ayman and Shareef during my games with the others, I started doing better and quite naturally rubbed it in their faces like they did with me every opportunity I had.

I had never seen anybody come back from the dead before, so you can imagine my surprise when the door opened and Kawa entered, carrying a black satchel. He glanced blandly around the room as we all stared at him with our jaws on the floor.

“Jumu'ah!” he said when he spotted me, breaking into a big grin under his

Puma cap.

“What up, boss?” I said, forcing myself to return the smile.

The Moroccan told him how saddened we’d all been to hear of his death and that we’d dedicated the *Fatiha* to him after. Kawa seemed about as moved by that as he was by the news that I was a Muslim—the Little Judge was many things, but foolish wasn’t one of them.

A few minutes later he left and I just sat there, with my head throbbing, devastated to learn he was still breathing. We were right back where we had been since day one—nowhere. With Kawa dead I’d thought there was a chance someone reasonable might be put in charge of my fate, but now all my hopes and prayers had been flushed down the toilet. My misery was painted all over my face. When I finally looked up and made eye contact with Theo I couldn’t believe it: he was staring at me with the most evil, sadistic grin I had ever seen, to let me know that he was taking considerable pleasure in my pain. It was like something you would expect from a Dostoevsky villain.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” I asked, jumping to my feet. I charged over, grabbed him by his beard and yanked it as hard as I could, ready to follow it up with a blow.

Naturally I only got one tug before it was broken up, but other than that nobody really seemed to mind. His conduct was becoming so perfidious that I found myself again asking God what I had done to deserve being locked in a room with such a person.

As always, I received no answer.

There were times during our stay at Obeida’s when I came close to losing it. I wasn’t the only one—it was obvious when someone was sinking into that place beyond depression, and usually when this happened the best thing was to leave them be as they stared into oblivion, letting them slog through to the other side on their own. The one who could always sense when I was in that dark place the most was Ayman, and when he did he would plop down in front of me, trying to distract me from whatever thoughts were circling my mind. To cheer me up he used the little English he knew to rag on Theo.

“Dog!” he’d say, jerking his thumb in Theo’s direction, and I always laughed.

Other times he would just start pointing around the room at different objects, teaching me their names in Arabic and quizzing me on them. Then he’d move on

to the days of the week and other basics. If anyone else had dropped in to give me language lessons when I was depressed I'd have told them to fuck off, and the rest of the men knew to give me my space when I was in this state, but my connection with Ayman was one of such deep affection that he knew I'd never say that to him. He was my best friend, someone who gave me solace when I found myself considering the possibility that I might die there, because I knew that as long as I ended up in a ditch with him, I'd be ready to face the end with a full heart and a brother beside me.

Since we were all taking full advantage of not being rushed while in the bathroom, Obeida began to have second thoughts about our setup. All week we watched him turning the room where the bathroom and arsenal were into a cell, building it up with cinder blocks. When it was finished he secured a thick iron door in the wall, with a big slot above it. That night we were transferred in to our new home, and at first sight it couldn't have been a bigger blow to morale.

The room was about the same size as our old one but pitch-black, with no window and no working light fixtures even when the electricity was on. The front of this store, where the gate was drawn down, had been completely sealed off with a wall of cinder blocks, except for at the very top where two blocks were missing and a piece of concrete divided the hole to make it impossible for any of us to fit through. All we had was the fluorescent light, which began to fade almost as soon as we switched it on. We all sought out new sleeping spots and I spread my blanket by Rias, directly next to the doorway. This spot turned out to be one of the crown jewels of the cell, with a constant draft from under the door that would keep me cool on the painfully hot days to come.

As soon as Obeida dropped by to check on us we started to bitch about the lights and he promised to bring in an electrician the next day. We were appropriately gracious but still pessimism loomed, as we all knew that in wartime plenty of things just couldn't be fixed.

The next morning, Obeida showed that he'd been thinking of us since laying the first block—the front gate was lifted from behind the wall and light flooded into the room through the opening he'd left at the top. The cell exploded with joy as everyone jumped to their feet, cheering and embracing each other.

“Hamdullah!” the Moroccan blurted out, with tears flowing down his cheeks and his hands held up to the heavens. For once, I agreed with him.

Now we had the luxury of a bathroom in our cell, and while exploring the

room the men found an abundance of materials to make use of. Above the bathroom was a lofted storage area, where Shabiha Ali found metal wires and razor-sharp shards of ceramic tile that could be used to cut things. He also found a bag filled with what looked like miles of tape from a cassette. There were two shades of the glossy plastic, black and off-white, and it was heavier and tougher than I'd thought. It didn't take long for one of the soldiers to go to work with this, and before we knew it he had constructed a whole other chess set, with knights that actually resembled horses. With the same material Rabir made a net and a ball about the size of a softball, forming a basketball rim from the thick steel wire. By nightfall we had two chess sets, one Mancala board, backgammon, a basketball hoop, and, after a visit from an electrician, the much-needed light Obeida had promised.

I'm sure if you took a pack of dogs who got along fine and locked them up in a small cage it wouldn't be long before they started biting each other, and that's exactly what happened with us. Tiffs were common, but rarely went beyond yelling and shit talking. Oqba had a beef with Shareef, Rabir had a beef with Oqba, and the Moroccan had a whole list of beefs—with Rias, Fadaar, Shabiha Ali, and of course yours truly. Abdelatif wasn't my only problem, though. Living in such close quarters meant that you could be at each other's throats one second and sharing bread the next—fights usually didn't last long, but they flared up easily. The closest I came to fighting one of the soldiers was when our holders were moving a group of prisoners, who they'd locked up across from us in our old cell. As soon as we heard them being taken out, I jumped to my feet and peered through the nickel-sized peephole that had been drilled just above where a doorknob would have been.

“Jumu'ah!” yelled Ali Sheikh. Ali Sheikh was the biggest soldier in the room, about 6'3” and maybe 220 pounds. He violently motioned for me to sit.

When I ignored him, he complained to the Moroccan that if I was caught we would all be punished, and when this was translated to me I shrugged it off and kept my eye on the peephole. Then he yelled at me again and I snapped around and answered him.

“Tell him to grow some fuckin' balls and shut up!” I said for the Moroccan to translate. “If there are other Westerners or journalists locked up in here I have to know in case I ever get out!”

Now an insult like this would no doubt have provoked a reaction in pretty much any American prison, but in an Arab one it wasn't just an insult, it was an

insult wrapped in a sin, thanks to their strong feelings about language. I definitely expected a scene once I was done with the task at hand, but first I counted nine prisoners through the peephole, all of them Arabs. Then I turned to address Ali Sheikh, now on his feet and storming toward me. I met him halfway and got right in his face, standing on my toes to meet the giant's eyes.

“What? You think I'm fuckin' scared of you?” I yelled.

His face was a mask of rage, but my confidence quickly drained him of his and before I knew it he was racing around me to the door to rat me out.

“C-I-A!” he said loudly, moving to pound on the door; a wall of his brothers prevented him from doing so.

This display caused quite a ruckus in the room, and later when Ayman defended my actions I heard the sound of Ali Sheikh's open hand colliding with his face. Everyone jumped up to get between the two men.

“You see what you did?” the Moroccan bellowed at me. “You see? He was defending you and that's why this happened!”

I stood there in shock. For an Arab to speak out against one of his own in defense of an American was unprecedented in our environment, an act of integrity and courage I never thought I would witness. I sat down next to Ayman, who was out of breath with anger, and gave him a soft pat on the shoulder.

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it with all my heart.

“You're welcome!” he yelled out proudly in English, for all to hear.

Later, Fadaar sat down to have a talk with me, with Ali as our translator. He wanted to know what the fight was about, and after I explained myself he nodded, looking searchingly at me with his clear blue eyes.

“You have to be careful here,” he said seriously. “Because we all love you a lot and don't want to see anything bad happen to you.”

I was overwhelmed with gratitude and thanked him for the love.

We could hear the two new Shabiha coming long before they entered our cell—not because of their footsteps or those of the guards, but because they were being tortured the whole way. We sat silently listening to their screaming; as they were ushered toward the cell it didn't sound like they went a single step without the cord flogging them across their backs. We heard both men on the ground outside the entrance to the room, being whipped repeatedly and without mercy. Then the door opened and they were thrown in.

“They look like thieves,” the Moroccan whispered in my ear.

And he was right. They did look like thieves—both were dressed in tight, tacky black outfits like something from a cheesy eighties movie. One of the men was covered in jailhouse tats that looked like they'd been done in crayon by a six-year-old; healed up inside his cheekbone was a bullet from being shot in the face. They were Syrian-born Palestinians, raised in the ghetto among their own people, who were still loyal to the regime.

The men sat against the wall catching their breaths as the call to prayer sounded and we all lined up. At first I thought the Palestinians passed on the prayer because they weren't religious, but the Moroccan explained to me that it was because they were both filthy from being beaten on the floor, and to pray in such a state was *haram*. After prayer, the soldiers pooled some of their extra clothes for them to change into and welcomed our new cellmates into the circle.

When the next set of Shabiha joined us it was worse—much worse. We heard one lash falling after another and two different screams roaring out, all directly outside our door. We heard others being tortured often, and every time we did I would look around the room at all the men's faces. It was the only time I remember seeing Fatr without a smile on his face; he would sit with his arms around his knees staring at the floor with this blank expression. We all knew we were safe for the moment, but it didn't spare us from feeling the pain of others. The only person who seemed unfazed was Theo, who would just sit there stroking his mustache with two fingers. It was something that not only I noticed—some of the other men did too, and they took great offense at it.

This time, when the jihadis had finally finished, we heard the padlock open and turned to the wall. A second later the two men hit the floor inside the cell and we were given permission to turn around by the Wolfman, who was practically foaming at the mouth with rage. He told us our new cellmates were Shabiha and that we were not to speak to them or go near them at all, but as soon as the door closed, several of the soldiers ran over to help the injured men.

These two were also Palestinians—neither one looked older than twenty, but they both looked broken. One of them, Norie, who was cute as a button when he wasn't face down in agony, was an ex-con like the last two Shabiha. His hands were tied behind his back so tightly that tears poured from his eyes. A couple of soldiers untied the men's wrists to get the blood flowing again and then loosely tied them back up. Eventually someone came by the cell and gave us permission to untie them, and as soon as we did Norie's friend lifted his shirt.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I've never seen anything like that in my life.”

All over his back were dozens of purple welt marks the exact dimension of the PVC piping they'd beaten him with. It looked like the Shabiha had been used as piñatas and their interrogators had been dead set on breaking them open. Norie's back wasn't as bad, but his arm was worse, and any attempt to move it made him cry out in pain.

"He thinks his arm is broken," the Moroccan translated, after he hurried over to play doctor with the first aid kit Obeida had provided for the room.

While Abdelatif was with his patient, a third prisoner was thrown into the cell, and when the Wolfman saw the Moroccan treating Norie he went ballistic and promised to punish him. Drowning in fear, Abdelatif immediately jumped to his feet and handed the Wolfman the first aid kit, apologizing and begging for mercy, saying he was only fulfilling his Hippocratic oath. This calmed the beast and a second later the door closed again and we were alone.

After someone untied our newest arrival he lifted his shirt, and what I saw made the injuries of the previous two look like nothing. Instead of dozens of pipe-sized welts there was just one—and it took up his entire back.

"Oh my God, it looks like *The Passion of the Christ*," I remarked in shock.

No matter how out of his mind the Moroccan had already proved to be, the more time that passed, the more insane captivity seemed to be making him. He was now fighting constantly with everyone in the room, and trying to unite all the Sunnis—which meant him and the Shabiha—into a *katiba*, with the hopes they'd be released to fight on the jihadis' side. I fought with him more than anyone, but for the sake of all in the room did my best to uphold the peace in between disputes. He claimed to have "racial superiority" over all of us, and the good treatment we were getting had clearly gone to his head. One evening, Abdelatif hobbled up to the entrance and spoke adamantly to Obeida, who nodded and then closed the door.

"What'd you say?" I asked.

"I told him I wanna file a complaint against Kawa," he told me.

"What are you, outta your mind?" I asked him. "Who do you think you're dealing with, the NYPD? They're terrorists!"

"No!" he barked in my face. "They're going to pay for my leg! Somebody is going to pay for the surgery to my leg!"

I tried to explain that he was better off just concentrating on surviving rather than on receiving restitution from al-Qaeda, but there was no getting through to

him. I also warned him to stop bad-mouthing Kawa just in case we ended up back in his hands, but he brushed that suggestion off as well.

The more dominant the Moroccan became in the room, the more abusive he was toward Theo. I'd be sitting on the other side of the cell, peacefully playing chess or having a conversation, when out of nowhere a loud *slap* would break my concentration and draw everyone's attention—and it was always the same guy on the receiving end. And every time it happened Theo would be back on his knees giving him a massage within an hour or two, after getting the most hollow, insincere apology the sociopath could spit out.

After a few slaps I started going over to Abdelatif once he had calmed down, to try to reason with him. I'd beg him to stop hitting Theo, and every time he'd promise to try, but we all knew it was an empty promise doomed to fail. To try and preempt the next assault I thought of a safety mechanism to maybe help my fellow American out a little. Whenever I saw that the Moroccan was at a boiling point and ready to explode, I'd yell "Code Red!" It sounds dumb, but it actually worked the first few times because the Moroccan went instantly from kill mode to laughing gimp.

Unfortunately for me, there was nobody to yell "Code Red!" when it was my turn. The fight happened at night, and there couldn't have been a stupider reason for it. One second we were getting along fine and the next we were cursing each other out, all because I asked him to translate something to Rias, who I'd forgotten he had a beef with at the moment. As soon as we started to really get heated I simply got up and walked over to the other side of the room, but this didn't shut him up and as usual he started threatening to tell Obeida that I was a Jewish CIA agent, and—also as usual—I called his bluff. A few minutes later I looked in his direction and found him staring at me, clearly looking for a fight, so I decided to give him one and stared right back, which provoked an immediate reaction.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" he screamed at me, jumping to his feet.

I knew that, strategically speaking, it was the wrong move to go up against a Sunni in a Sunni prison, but I just couldn't take one more second of this guy's shit, and I leapt to my feet with my fists raised.

"Come on, motherfucker!" I screamed at him, ready to go, but before he could hobble over every man in the room was between us.

As soon as Ayman grabbed me I settled down, not having any desire to put

up a fight against people who were trying to help me. I didn't see the Moroccan's fist coming because he waited for me to turn away so that he could blindside me. The punch landed flush on my jaw, but with nothing behind it except for the shit pouring out of his mouth, it didn't faze me for a second. I balled up my fists, ready to rock, but before I could cock back hands were restraining me from every direction.

Once everything had settled down again, Ali Hussain, a captain and one of the most loved and respected men in the room, came up and embraced me.

"You are a great man," he said gratefully, with the little English he knew.

I felt a surge of pride when I heard this, and when I made eye contact with Shareef and Fadaar a second later they were both smiling proudly as well.

"Jumu'ah!" Fadaar called out. He held up his fists, praising me for standing up to the most hated man in the room.

I may have taken the hit, but the message was clear to everyone in the cell: I was not Theo and would not stand to be treated like Theo for a single second. In my eyes our environment was kind of like the Olympics—every man in that cell represented his country, sect, or hood, and I was going to do so bravely and honorably, to show everyone there and every jihadi holding us exactly what Americans were made of.

Nobody in the room, including the Moroccan, ever raised up on me again.

When the door opened and they strolled in, we all knew immediately that we were in the presence of power, but none of us had any idea just how much. On June first, we had been held prisoner within the stores for twenty-seven days, and had not received a visit from the emir since before we were transferred into the new cell. Now a group of men, the emir among them, entered, and leading the pack was an extremely confident man in his late forties with a long black beard, a buttoned-up black-and-white-checkered shirt, and camouflage pants. When he addressed the room he did so through squinted eyes to emphasize his contempt for the Alawites. He accused them of being terrible Muslims; he said they drank, smoked, and fucked their sisters. By the time he was finished every Alawite in the room looked crushed by having to take such abuse without defending themselves—although a few did try to speak up, without success. When the man finally looked down to see me by his feet, his expression suddenly softened and he abruptly switched to broken English.

"Who are you?" he asked, confused.

“I’m an American photographer.”

“What are you doing here?”

“They kidnapped me!” I said. “And they robbed me! They think I’m a spy!”

“You’re not a spy. How long have you been here?”

“Since May fifth.”

He looked shocked when he heard this and stepped over to the emir, who was leaning against the door in the background. The Moroccan translated as he asked why Americans had been held there for so long without him being notified. When Blackbeard came back over to me, he had a young man with him to act as a translator. I stood up out of respect and answered all of his questions.

As all this was going on some of our guests got bored, and decided to head over to the Shabiha to slap the shit out of them for a while.

During our entire conversation, Blackbeard wore a warm smile that actually had a comforting effect on me. When I told him I’d been tortured he looked embarrassed and even a little angry—as bizarre as it was, he seemed to like me because I was an American, although he wasn’t buying what the Moroccan told him about my newfound love for Allah.

“Why don’t you wait until you go home to become a Muslim,” he said to me. “And tell all the Jews they can stay in America because we already have the Alawites here!”

“Yeah, I’ll let them know,” I said with a smirk.

Then *he* entered the room.

Like I said, we’d all known as soon as Blackbeard and his boys came in that we were in the presence of power, but when the Old Man followed a few minutes later he dwarfed everyone there like the giant he clearly was. As he walked through the door, cleaning his teeth with a stick through his long gray beard, all the commanders and jihadis parted as if he were royalty. He was dressed in all black and didn’t say a word as he sized me up. I greeted him with a goofy smile.

“*Assallam alekum*,” I said with a wave.

Before he had time to answer, Blackbeard took him by the arm and led him over to the bathroom where he spoke to him passionately. When they returned Blackbeard told me and Theo that we would be supplied with pens and paper to write reports on everything that had happened to us up until now, and that he was going to try to help us. I couldn’t believe my ears and thrust out my hand for Blackbeard to shake.

“Thank you!” I said earnestly in Arabic. He corrected me as he accepted my hand, reciting the more proper expression of gratitude called for.

It was a few words too long for me to remember so I mumbled the ending like George Costanza would and got a big laugh out of everyone there. I then shook the hands of all present, from the Old Man to the Wolfman. When the door closed and then opened again a few minutes later to let Obeida in with our writing materials, I felt better than I had since the day I was kidnapped. For months I had been bitching to Theo that there had to be at least one Oskar Schindler somewhere in this fucked-up organization who would be willing to help us, and on this day we thought we’d finally met him.

I didn’t know it yet, but the Old Man was Abu Khaled al-Suri, commander of Ahrar al-Sham. He’d fought beside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and was ordered to Syria to unite all the rebel groups under one flag—sent personally by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda and the most wanted man in the world.

As one day turned into two and two into three I struggled to stay positive. On the night of June fifth, the door opened, and in stepped the emir. He looked slowly around the room until his eyes rested on me and then he pointed in my direction. I jumped to my feet and ran over to him, eager for whatever news he had come to give me. Being that he didn’t speak a word of English and Theo still refused to translate for me, even when the news involved him as well, the Moroccan struggled to his feet and hobbled over to do the job.

“Do you know where you are?” the emir asked.

“No,” I said.

“Well, you’re with Ahrar al-Sham now. You were with Jabhat al-Nusra, but now you’re with us. We are going to investigate you both, and if you are who you say you are we will let you go—maybe.”

When the Moroccan was done translating I lit up like a menorah on day eight.

“Thank you,” I said fervently, gripping his hand.

“*Maybe*,” he reiterated.

After I sat back down he called one of the Shabiha over to slap him around a little before locking us all back in. Many of the men came over to congratulate me as I sat overwhelmed with emotion at the possibility that maybe, *maybe*, I would be going home. At least if I was no longer a prisoner of Jabhat al-Nusra

then Kawa was no longer the master of my fate—Blackbeard was.

The room was like an oven now, as temperatures soared to well over 100 degrees. The gap from under the door helped a little, but not enough. To combat the heat Obeida installed a ceiling fan, but since it was on the opposite side of the room from where I slept I had to travel to enjoy the warm breeze it created. Another problem that came along with the summer heat was a lack of water. The water went out for days at a time, forcing us to ration what we drank and used to clean ourselves in the bathroom. Eventually it became so bad that Obeida had someone feed a thick fire hose through the hole he'd left in the cinder blocks, hooked it up to a tanker, and filled the stainless steel reserve tank above the bathroom. This tank would last us a day or two, long enough for the water to come back on or for Obeida to arrange for a refill. It was on the occasion of one of these refills that he surprised us all with an act of kindness.

Once the hose was fed through the hole, Shabiha Ali would pull himself up on top of the bathroom like a gymnast. Someone would hand him the hose, and when it was in position, Obeida would yell out to the street. The water shot from the hose in a powerful blast that filled the tank—which probably held about twenty-five gallons—in a matter of seconds, and Shabiha Ali would then move the hose out of the way while Obeida yelled out to the truck to stop the water. This time, though, instead of yelling outside, he yelled to us, wearing his big smile:

“Whoever needs a shower, go!”

Right away a bunch of the men grabbed the blankets to keep them from getting soaked while the rest stripped down to their underwear and ran beneath the icy water. I did the same except for my green tee shirt, which I left on to cover my tattoos. The Palestinians were on squeegee duty and worked vigorously to get all the water out through the thin floor-level gap in the cinder blocks that had been placed there for that purpose.

When I ran into the jet and that cold water hit my skin it nearly knocked the wind out of me, but once I had gotten used to it I completely forgot that I was in jail. For the next five minutes, as we passed the soap back and forth, danced, and sang beneath the water we were all children again, kickin' the can.

Over the next few weeks Theo's treachery evolved into a willingness to help the Moroccan plot against me. By now Abdelatif and I were constantly at each

other's throats and I was no longer trying to keep the peace, but welcoming the confrontations—many times even starting them. Theo would act as an interpreter on a daily basis for one of the Shabiha that Abdelatif was trying to sic on me, translating his threats while standing at his side. I cannot remember who I laughed harder at.

One morning the Moroccan even decreed to the entire room that Theo was his property, and that anyone who messed with Theo would have him to deal with. Strategically, I figured that since things between me and the Moroccan had deteriorated so drastically, I should reconcile with Theo and try my hardest to keep that peace, so that he would stop siding with al-Qaeda against me. To avoid drawing attention from his master, I asked Theo if he wanted to play chess and as we played I tried to explain how he had become a pawn himself; when that failed to get through to him I moved on to honor.

“Theo, do you wanna go home someone you can be proud of, or someone who has to lie about everything that happened over here?” I asked.

“I really don't think I've done anything to compromise my dignity,” he said in a tone that made it clear that even he didn't believe what he was saying.

I brought up the massages for the hundredth time, and how by giving them he was disgracing our country in a room full of soldiers.

“Oh, come on, the guy's hurt.”

“The guy's the biggest enemy our country has ever faced! Stop giving him massages!”

To try to penetrate his denial and pathetic rationalizations, I began to detail his actions and how they constituted treason. I tried to make him imagine returning home and how he was going to live with himself for the rest of his life. And for a minute I seemed to get through to him. He just put his head down and didn't say a word. But I was wasting my breath.

“I'd rather fight with you than hear it from him,” he said finally.

This was the reason he gave for siding with the Moroccan against me. For the rest of the game we discussed other things, and after all that we ended on a positive note: Theo and I shook hands and made a pact between countrymen, agreeing that we would both try harder to get along and, moving forward, work together as Americans.

A few hours after the chess game was over I was lying on the floor with my head on a pillow, just zoning out, when the Moroccan crawled up next to me. After a

little small talk he got right to the point.

“Did you tell Theo that I was using him against you and to stop giving me massages?”

I couldn't believe my ears. Theo had shaken my hand while promising to work with me for our mutual benefit moving forward—then he'd gotten up, run over to my greatest enemy, and told him every negative thing I'd said about him, including that I wanted Theo working with me instead.

“No, I didn't say that,” I said to the Moroccan. “He's just trying to start a fight between us.”

Naturally, he believed me, and just ended up getting mad at Theo. The next morning, I sat across from Theo and promised to tell the world what he'd done. He had officially earned a nickname of his own: The Benedict Arnold of Journalism.

June nineteenth started out like any other night. I was sitting in the rear of the cell playing chess when we heard the door being unlocked. We swept the chessboard aside so it wouldn't be seen just as Obeida and the Wolfman entered and summoned the Moroccan, Theo, and me over to them. The Wolfman looked me over, confused—I was wearing my jeans inside out.

“So the bedbugs can't hide under the seams,” I explained.

Then the Wolfman told the three of us to change: we were going to be released, after first being taken to Jabhat al-Nusra's main headquarters in Aleppo to do some paperwork. The Moroccan and I rejoiced, while Theo showed virtually no emotion. To celebrate the occasion Obeida promised to bring an enormous kettle of chai for everyone.

After we were locked back up, all the men stood and ran over to me for a hug, a kiss, and to say congratulations. When I was finally able to see through the cluster of soldiers around me I noticed Ayman sitting against the back wall, tears flowing down his cheeks. Not out of jealousy, or even sadness that he was staying; they were flowing out of happiness.

I sat next to Ayman, took out my *mesbahah*—the one I'd made at the villa and had prayed with ever since—and handed it to him.

“Now you give me yours,” I said, holding back my own tears.

He produced his beautiful white *mesbahah* with its long tassels and purple twine and gave it to me. I had seen him praying with it for hours some days. I promised him that I would never lose it or let it go, but I don't think he

understood that part of the conversation because later, after the tea was served, he came up to me with Ali as translator to deliver a message.

“Ayman says that if you lose his *mesbahah* he will come to America and kick your ass,” Ali said with a big smile.

I laughed and told him I would die first.

We waited all night to be taken from the cell, but nobody came to get us. That long, long night was followed by an even longer day, but on the evening of the twentieth Obeida entered solo and called the three of us over once again. He told us that we were about to be transferred and that Shareef and the Senator would follow as well. I only caught part of this statement, their names, and when Obeida allowed me a few minutes to say goodbye to the men I walked right past Shareef without even a glance, thinking he and the Senator were coming with us.

“Jumu’ah,” he said.

When I turned around to look at this gentle giant who had become a brother to me I could see the sadness in his swollen red eyes.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I asked.

“No,” said Shareef.

I grabbed him and we hugged tightly, knowing our chances of ever seeing each other again were slim. I wanted to cry, but I didn’t.

“Jumu’ah,” Obeida called from the doorway.

The cell grew silent as I turned and the men parted to make a path to the door. In Obeida’s hand were white lace blindfolds. He put mine on, and a moment later we were led out of the cell.

THE WAREHOUSE

JUNE 20, 2013

As soon as we were taken from the van, we knew we weren't going home.

"Yala!" a voice roared as I was ripped from the vehicle.

The moment my bare feet touched the pavement, my arm was twisted viciously behind my back. I was led into a building and down a long, winding staircase. Wherever they were taking us was deep underground and definitely not the main headquarters of Jabhat al-Nusra. When we finally reached the bottom I was pushed into a cavernous basement where my holders' yelling echoed all around me. I was placed on my knees. It was quiet now, and I heard them bringing in Theo and the Moroccan. Then I heard someone running right at me, his footsteps reverberating like thunder—

Boom!

The bottom of a boot landed in the center of my back and my head snapped back like a rag doll. I flew forward, landing facedown on a foam mattress. I felt like I'd been hit with a wrecking ball and slid from the mattress, gasping for air. When I finally caught my breath I heard the unmistakable sound of the wooden stick being picked up and moved into position—they were putting Theo in the tire. I just lay there, waiting for my turn.

The blows landing on the bottoms of Theo's feet were fierce and each followed by the same word, in Arabic:

"Kafir!" Nonbeliever.

Theo's screams were horrific, echoing throughout the enormous room.

"Kafir!" the voice continued to yell, until at last Theo screamed that he was a Christian and another voice stepped in on his behalf.

"No, wait, wait," it said. "He believes in something! He believes in something!"

Now it was my turn, but no one bothered putting me in the tire; instead he crept up on me and gave me seven or eight good licks on the bottoms of my feet, my ass, and my ankles. This guy was whaling on me harder than the punks at the

hospital ever did, and the shots to my ankles stripped the skin off as efficiently as a weed whacker. All the while he screamed a question, but I had no idea what the maniac was asking.

“No Arabic, no Arabic!” I kept shouting.

Finally, Theo answered for me.

“He’s a Muslim,” he said.

As soon as the words were out my punishment ceased; I was rolled over and told to remove my blindfold. Standing above me like the Grim Reaper himself was our new captor, holding his pointer finger up toward the sky. This meant he wanted me to recite the *Shahada*.

“*There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is the true prophet,*” I said in Arabic, through gasps of breath.

The man slowly nodded his shaggy head in approval. He was not particularly large, but terrifying to look at, with a long beard and spiky eyebrows, his mass of dark hair pushed back. His name was Abu Abdullah, and with me out of the way he turned to the Moroccan, dealing him heavy blows across the ass and backs of his legs.

“I’m a doctor!” Abdelatif pleaded, over and over.

When the abuse stopped at last, Abu Abdullah informed us that he would be back in the morning to repeat the ritual, and then our holders took their leave.

As we heard them securing the door with a padlock, the Moroccan and I exchanged looks, our eyes awash in fear and uncertainty.

“A new beginning,” he said to me, nodding.

I nodded back, holding his gaze. It was the first time in a long time that we’d agreed on something.

As I lay there, on the first mattress I had been on in almost six months, one thought finally began to take hold.

“You know, this is the first time I actually feel like I might not live through this,” I said.

“Me too,” said the Moroccan.

Theo agreed as well, but then again he always thought they were going to kill us.

It had taken us a few moments to get our bearings. On the floor were three mattresses with blankets and pillows, but the welcoming touches ended there.

We must have been fifty feet underground—that was about the height of the ceiling. Massive concrete pillars adorned with Arabic graffiti loomed throughout the space. In the far right corner was a towering mass of debris, everything from plywood, to dozens of glass hookahs, to the huge sign that had once graced the outside of the warehouse where we were now confined. Thanks to that sign, for once we knew right away where we were: the Talal Tourism and Trading Cargo Co. To the left, jutting out from the back wall, was a partition of cinder blocks, and behind it an elevator shaft. In the center of the basement was the entrance, the bottom of the stairs barricaded by a green gate. We did have electricity, when it was running, but when it was out there was no natural light during the day except for what crept through the elevator shaft and the fogged windows high up at ground level along the front.

There was absolutely no getting out of there.

“That’s not a good sign,” I heard Theo say.

I turned, just as the biggest rat I had ever seen skittered across the room and disappeared into the pile of debris. Not long after, the lights went out; we were back in the black of darkness, only this time we weren’t alone. All around us we could hear the scratching of the rats, who were clearly used to living with humans and not afraid of us at all.

Theo was right for once: this was not a good sign.

We could usually hear our captors coming well in advance thanks to the endless echoing staircase. Not long after the darkness overtook us we heard them returning, three of them. By now the protocol was second nature; we moved to the back wall and put our faces to it as the glow of their light drew closer. When the footsteps stopped we were told to turn, and found an older man with a long black beard and a baseball cap crouched in front of us, with Abu Abdullah to the left of him and another guard on the right. I don’t think he was an emir, but he was definitely intense and definitely in charge. He was in his mid to late forties, but had the worn face of a sixty-year-old, and he held the light under his chin, the shadows it threw making him and his comrades—Abu Abdullah in particular—look especially fearsome. The Leader addressed the Moroccan first, and as he turned his attention toward me Abdelatif filled him in on my history—including the fact that I had found Allah.

“Do the *Fatiha* for them,” he said.

As I sang their most sacred prayer our three captors looked at me as if I were an angel. Abu Abdullah seemed the most moved by my performance, and by the end was nodding vigorously. Now came the questioning, with the Moroccan acting as translator.

“Do you regret coming to Syria?” the Leader asked me.

“No,” I said with conviction.

“Why?”

“Because it has made me a stronger person, a better person.”

“Do you think you are going to die here?”

“No,” I said.

“Good, your faith is strong,” said the Leader, turning his attention to Theo.

“Do you think you’re going to live?”

“I sure hope so,” Theo answered meekly.

“You are weak and your faith is weak!” he spat.

The Leader asked us if we were hungry, and a little while later a healthy portion of greasy fried eggs and Spam was delivered to us by two guards, along with an abundance of bread. It was a nice way to end a rough night, but we still had the next morning to look forward to, and with it Abu Abdullah’s promise to return for another round of torture.

Next to the warehouse was a mosque, and the *Adhan* blaring out of its speakers meant there was no mistaking when morning arrived. None of us said a word and none of us prayed. We just sat there, waiting for Abu Abdullah to appear. As day overcame the night the basement took on a gray and colorless gloom. It couldn’t have been more depressing. When we heard footsteps coming down the stairs we all quickly scooted to the wall and put our heads against it while seated. The door opened and the footsteps continued, coming to a stop right behind us, and then the voice of Abu Abdullah began speaking to the Moroccan.

“He said you can turn around,” the Moroccan said to me. “This is so nice.”

I turned around and looked up. Peering down at me with these big, apologetic, puppy-dog eyes was Abu Abdullah, looking as if he was waiting for me to say something.

“He wants you to know that what happened last night was a misunderstanding,” the Moroccan explained. “That they got some wrong information and he’s really sorry about what happened.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

He was. I sat there in stunned disbelief for a moment as Abu Abdullah anxiously awaited my answer—he needed my forgiveness, or else Allah would hold him accountable one day for this sin.

“Okay, thanks,” I said finally, extending my hand for him to shake.

Then he moved on and apologized to Theo before leaving, telling us he would return shortly with our breakfast. He also promised to bring a plumber in to fix the toilet.

“Dude, did that really just fuckin’ happen?” I asked, once he was gone.

“That’s the first time anyone ever apologized for giving me the tire,” Theo said, and we all erupted into laughter.

The weight of death that we’d felt resting on our backs the night before had been lifted in a matter of seconds—by an apology from a sociopathic torture expert. It was amazing how quickly things could turn around in Syria.

From this point on Abu Abdullah treated us as guests, feeding us well and providing us with clothes, soap, and pretty much anything else we asked for. Sometimes he would come down late at night to bring us a snack, sharing whatever he and his brothers were munching on. It was a pleasant surprise, in a world where surprises were usually anything but pleasant.

Other people in the warehouse weren’t so lucky.

The torture we heard being conducted upstairs by Abu Abdullah and the Leader was the worst of any so far. Often in the midst of it we’d hear a gunshot from out of nowhere, most likely fired inches from the victim’s head. I don’t think they ever wounded or killed anybody with one of these shots because the screaming never increased afterward, and it never stopped, either.

We only met one of the many torture victims. We were dutifully staring at the wall when they brought him down, and waited until we were given permission to turn around. In the background, taking a seat on the floor, was our new cellmate, Omar. Before us was the Leader, going nuts and pointing at him. I didn’t understand a single thing coming out of his mouth with the exception of one word, but that one word explained everything: *Shabiha*.

“He says don’t talk to him,” the Moroccan translated.

We all promised to leave him alone and they left. Omar, in excruciating pain, lay on a mattress they’d pulled from a pile. When I finally made my way over I saw that all the skin had been stripped away from his ankles, leaving nothing but raw, open flesh. A few days later Abu Abdullah called the Moroccan over to

show him how he deals with Shabiha. He stood above Omar and placed the bottom of his boot on his ankle wound, mashing it like he was putting out a cigarette.

The Moroccan, not sure how he was expected to respond to such cruelty, encouraged the abuse to prove his loyalty as a true jihadi. When he came over afterward to describe the scene, he was laughing.

The bathroom situation had its ups and downs. Up: we had hot water in the shower. Down: the squat toilet had a broken pump, and had backed up all over the floor. Next to the bathroom were two little rooms right next to each other, one like a tiny kitchen area with a sink, one with the shower. I was the first to use the bathroom, the day after we arrived, feeling the greasy eggs coming back to haunt me from the night before. Opening that door was a traumatic experience, like something out of a Jackson Pollock nightmare. The entire floor and all four walls were caked and splattered in dried shit. It was the only toilet, so I found a big metal mixing bowl in one of the debris piles, took it into the shower room, shat in it, and then washed myself up nice. To discard the contents of the bowl I just opened the stall door and flung it in, aiming for the hole, but not particularly caring where it landed. After I washed it out I put the bowl off to the side for the other two to use when nature called. I gave stern instructions on the post-defecation process.

“You hear me, Theo?” I asked. “Don’t leave the bowl where Abu Abdullah can see or else we’re gonna end up eating from it!”

Most people know you don’t shit where you eat (or eat where you shit), but Theo being Theo, I watched that bowl like a fucking hawk.

I got sick several times over the course of my captivity, twice from overeating. My logic when it came to food was that we never knew when we might be moved or how they would feed us at our next jail, so whenever there was a surplus I went at it like a badger. The first time I got sick from this was at the stores, where I had my Alawite brothers there to support and help me. The second time was at the warehouse, where I had only Theo and a psychopath, and the psychopath was the more sympathetic of the two.

Abu Abdullah had served us some kind of meat and vegetables, and as usual I scarfed it down like my stomach was a bottomless pit. Afterward, I was so full I could barely walk. All I could do was lie there as the nausea crept up on me. I

tried as hard as I could to put it out of my mind, knowing that if I puked my stomach would be on empty for at least the next fourteen hours, but there was no holding it in and I ended up bent over the sink, yakking my guts out until there was nothing left but the dry heaves. Eventually I made it back to my bed and flopped down on it.

“You okay?” the Moroccan asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

I looked over at Theo, who was staring at the ceiling stroking his mustache like he didn't have a care in the world. This was at least the third time I'd gotten violently ill around him and not once had he asked me how I was doing or if I needed his help, though I'd done both for him when it was the other way around. The more I thought about it the more furious I became, but I didn't have the strength to do more than fume at him from my mattress.

After making us write yet another set of reports for yet another promised investigation, Abu Abdullah led us over to the elevator shaft, which was filled with all kinds of shit, and told us to clear it out and hide our beds in there for our own safety, in case there were visitors. We stared at the huge pile in front of us, towering well over our heads, all thinking the same thing: *How many rats are in there?*

Since it wasn't like we had a choice, we just dug in and began carrying stuff out of the shaft and tossing it on the other debris pile in the corner. There was an upside-down awning full of old dirty clothes; Theo took a pair of sneakers and put them off to the side and I did the same with some sweatpants. In three hours we had the entire elevator shaft cleared, scrubbed, and squeegeed—and miraculously, not one rat jumped out during the entire process. Theo put his bed in first, directly beneath the elevator; the Moroccan was next, in the middle; and then me. We could see through the cracks that on the first floor the elevator was right next to a garage door that was always open a little; this gave us a bit of sunlight on the dark days when the electricity was out. To conceal ourselves we hung a line across the entranceway to the shaft and draped several dark blankets over it. It was a cozy, if depressing, spot. Omar had to stay outside like a dog.

Once I found materials in the debris piles to use as weights I began to spend most of my time working out, and pretty much kept to myself. There was an axle I used for curls; an extension cord I used for a jump rope, and an exercise mat

that I used for air bicycles and sit-ups. In between reps I jogged around the entire floor three times. I'd always kept in shape back home, hitting the gym six days a week, so this was a way for me to try to reclaim some semblance of my old life. It also helped me keep my head clear.

Sometimes hours would pass without me saying a word to anyone. This was a change as I had always been somewhat talkative, and now that I wasn't feeling chatty Abdelatif decided to become Theo's new best friend. The two would sit right outside the elevator shaft when I was inside, speaking in French because they knew it annoyed the hell out of me—not because I wanted to know what they were saying but because I knew that if the guards heard Theo speaking in yet another language it would only reinforce their suspicions that he was a spy, which wouldn't do anything to help my case.

At night the Moroccan would sing the Koran so it echoed all through our vast prison. While he sang Theo would lie next to him facedown on an exercise mat like a mutt, letting the flies land and swarm around him by the dozen without moving to swat them off. He was now always at the Moroccan's side, sleeping when he slept and staying awake when he was up.

"I want to go to Anadan with you," Theo said to him one day as we all sat in bed, staring up at the sunlight creeping in through the shaft.

Abdelatif promised to take him there if we all got released together, and when I tried to convince Theo that it was smarter to head straight for the Turkish border than to accompany the Moroccan back to the town where he had been shot and kidnapped, it was like talking to a brick wall. He was totally infatuated with Abdelatif; sometimes it seemed like the two were in love. Theo even planned to help him get back into the States if we survived, offering to put him up at his mother's house in Vermont and give him money to get started. The fact that Abdelatif was a member of al-Qaeda no longer seemed to register. Listening to them talk long into the night I thanked God that I'd never told Theo I was Jewish. There was little doubt in my mind that if I had he'd have told the Moroccan during one of these conversations, and even less doubt that this would have been my death sentence.

The rats in the warehouse were big, but it was their boldness that intimidated us most. Before we relocated to the elevator shaft, we'd often be sitting on our mattresses when a rat came charging out of a debris pile like a raging bull. It would run straight at us, its little claws screeching across the concrete, and just before it reached the beds it would break to the right, darting around the

mattresses and behind a lone file cabinet that stood against the wall.

“They’re not afraid of us!” the Moroccan exclaimed the first time this happened.

“No shit!” I said. “You see the way he came at us? It was like someone dared him to do it!”

I tried several times to make traps, but these rats were way too smart for that. We were totally defenseless if they ever decided to rise up against us . . .

The Rat Offensive began when I was sleeping. Next to me my cellmates sat on their mattresses, enjoying the little light we had. I was just drifting off into a peaceful slumber when I suddenly felt something heavy racing up my bare arm. My eyelids flew open to see a Chihuahua-sized rat sitting on my shoulder, staring me right in the eyes.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, flinging the giant vermin off.

The rat hit the floor and then made for the garbage pile, dragging its hind legs as if it was injured. Meanwhile, I’d jumped up and run for the corner under the elevator; the Moroccan and Theo—who hadn’t seen a thing and still had no clue why I was screaming—scrambled to do the same. The three of us stood there, clinging to each other like three little girls trapped in a room full of snakes.

“What happened? What happened?” the Moroccan asked, his eyes darting around in terror.

“A rat! A rat!” I cried. “A fuckin’ rat ran up my arm!”

Once they figured out why they were cowering in the corner Abdelatif and Theo began to laugh, more at how scared they’d been than at me and my new friend, who made Ben look like a bitch.

After our initial misunderstanding—if you can call something that ended with Theo in a tire and my ankles bleeding a “misunderstanding”—Abu Abdullah worked overtime to make us feel like guests, which has symbolic importance in this kind of situation. One of the things he did to make it up to us was to sing the Koran in this shockingly beautiful voice that echoed through our massive cell. The first time he did this was when the electricity was out, as he was bringing us lunch. He said he was singing so Allah would hear him and bless us with light.

Abu Abdullah was thrilled that I had found Islam. I think it was on our

second morning that we heard him coming down the stairs right after the *Adhan*. Neither the Moroccan nor I had risen, but when the sound of his footsteps reached our ears we were out of our beds like they had ejector seats. I ran over to the kitchen room and immediately began *Wudu*, the cleansing process all Muslims must perform before prayer. Abu Abdullah had come over to watch and I pretended not to know he was behind me as I stood at the sink washing my arms, face, hair, ears, and ankles, making sure to do it properly to meet his expectations. When I came out I shook his hand, and he motioned for me to take my place on the quilt that served as my prayer rug. The Moroccan tried to insist that Abu Abdullah lead the prayer, but he refused—he was not there to lead; he was there to observe. Just before the Moroccan began the *Fatiha*, Abu Abdullah placed his bare foot beside mine so that the sides of our feet were touching, a custom I had never encountered during my time with the Alawites. I moved smoothly through the motions of the morning prayer, and by the time it was over there was no doubt in Abu Abdullah’s mind: I was the real-deal Holyfield.

His talent as a singer was exceeded only by his brutality as a torturer, and the sounds produced by the latter were as bone-chilling as his singing was melodic. Once, Theo, the Moroccan, and I were lying in the shaft, staring up at the ceiling as we listened to the endless screams punctuated by gunshots. It was a long interrogation, and almost as soon as the screaming stopped we heard Abu Abdullah on the stairs. When he entered our corner we all looked up at him, without saying a word. He was filthy, covered from head to toe in dirt, and the look in his eyes was black as tar. In his hand was a plastic bag and once he was done looking us over he stepped closer and knelt before me. I noticed that he was panting, out of breath from whatever he’d been doing to the poor soul upstairs. He reached into the bag and pulled out some bread and a round container of cheese, unwrapped the plastic, placed it before me, and then held out his hands as if to say “*Bon appétit!*” When I reached out to take the garbage from him he shook his head once, held up a finger, and then left, making his way back across the basement and up the stairs.

Nobody said a word throughout this entire scene. A few minutes later, Abu Abdullah was back at work, and the screaming resumed.

As time passed and updates about how great our cases looked turned into promises of rides to the border, we all tried to stay positive and believe we would truly be released. Yet despite the hopeful signs, my mood was at an all-time low—when I wasn’t working out I was walking in circles, making endless, silent

laps of our shadowy subterranean cell. It was during one of these laps that I heard the yelling coming from upstairs. I stopped at the entrance and looked up through the ironwork above the door, and a second later I saw Abu Abdullah rushing down the stairs holding handcuffs, the clatter of more footsteps behind him. I ran over to the elevator shaft.

“Abu Abdullah’s coming,” I said. “He has handcuffs.”

“That’s not good,” said the Moroccan.

A second later Abu Abdullah, the Leader, and another jihadi I had never seen before entered the cell and walked over to us. The Leader did the talking; he said we were being moved and that he had no other information. I pleaded with him to let me run over to the clothesline to get my ski cap. It was the only part of my old identity that I’d managed to hold on to; an outline of the States hidden right there on the label, and there was no way I was going to let that go if I could help it. The Leader gave me permission to retrieve the hat, and a few minutes later we were led up the stairs, blindfolded, and then outside into the blazing sun. We had been underground for only eleven days, but the great, dungeon-like gloom of the cell made it feel as if it had been an eternity.

The first voice I heard when we stepped outside stopped me dead, sending chills down my spine.

“Jumu’ah, it’s Abu Dejana,” Kawa’s assistant said cheerfully.

He must have expected a chipper response; it was obvious he thought I hadn’t heard him by the way he repeated himself—just as friendly, but a little louder.

“Jumu’ah,” he said again, “it’s Abu Dejana!”

“Hey, how are you,” I said in Arabic, with a big smile.

A large man came up beside me, twisting my free arm behind my back and pushing me toward a van.

“No, no, no,” Abu Dejana said when I grunted in pain, letting my holder know I wasn’t to be treated that way.

The rear door of the van opened and Theo, the Moroccan, and I were placed inside. A few minutes later, we were zooming through the streets of Aleppo—I was crushed, knowing that we were right back in Kawa’s hands.

THE TRANSPORTATION BUILDING

JULY 1, 2013

Almost the second the van stopped, we were taken from it—this time the Moroccan and I had been cuffed together; we were ushered into a building and down a staircase just inside the entrance, then down another set of stairs to the basement, then through a door, about ten feet from the bottom step. We were made to sit down and heard men gathering around us from all sides. I felt someone’s warm breath next to my ear.

“What is your name?” hissed a voice in English.

“Matthew, but they call me Jumu’ah.”

“What do you want?”

“*Huriya*,” I answered.

My Arabic had thrown him off.

“What?”

“*Huriya!*” I said, louder. “Freedom!”

The man stood back up and addressed us in Arabic. He wasn’t whispering now, and I recognized the voice immediately—it was Kawa. A few moments later our handcuffs were removed, the door was locked, and a second after that our blindfolds were off.

Theo, the Moroccan, and I were alone. The room was small, about twelve paces wide and the same across; on the floor was nothing but a single black mattress with no blankets. This cell was not like any we had been in before. For one thing, there were no names, calendars, or Koran quotes carved into the walls. Wherever we were, this was obviously not a room used for holding prisoners long term. When I pointed this out to the other two, there was really only one conclusion to draw: we were in court.

We all hugged to celebrate, and while doing so I noticed over the Moroccan’s shoulder that the wires covering one of the windows had been shoddily repaired, but since the Moroccan’s size meant only two out of three of us could fit through the window, I figured I was better off not even bringing up the topic of escape.

After a few hours one of the guards came by to drop off several blankets, and we made up our beds. The Moroccan got the mattress and placed it in a corner. I took his extra blanket to use as a pillow and made my bed across the room from him, in the opposite corner. Instead of placing his bed in the center Theo laid his blanket directly next to the mattress, as if making it an extension of the bed, so they could sleep side by side.

The bathroom was off to the left when you entered, and had been created by breaking through the concrete wall. The space was divided by a partition of cinder blocks piled about seven feet high, with your average white ceramic sink on one side and on the other a hose and a squat toilet in the tile floor. When I felt on top of the blocks I found a small piece of soap. The ground under the sink was unfinished and the pipes leaked; between that and the extra water from the toilet hose there was a constant puddle underfoot.

One important difference in this jail we wouldn't notice right away: Turning to the wall whenever someone entered the room was standard protocol everywhere, but usually this rule relaxed after a few days once the guards got used to us seeing their faces. Here, this didn't happen. We had to keep our foreheads pinned to the wall while sitting on our beds without fail—we were never given permission to turn. This seemed like another hopeful sign. If they didn't want us to see them they definitely didn't plan on killing us, or so we told ourselves.

The door that divided us from freedom was an iron one and huge—it was too big for the original frame, and pieces of the wall had been bashed off to make it fit. All this bashing had left a gap about two inches wide between the door and the jagged concrete on one side, giving us a clear view of the hallway. When I looked I saw a very limited space and only one other cell to the right of us, and broken broomsticks and cables all over the floor for those who were deemed worthy of torture.

High on the far wall of our cell were four typical basement windows. They were about ten inches from top to bottom, and the four of them spanned the entire length of the wall. As usual, packed-out grain bags sat on the ground outside them, blocking our view. The two windows in the middle were intact, and opened inward. The other two, those to the far right and left, were broken, with only a shard or two of glass left sticking out of the frame. Beyond the frames were sills a little less than a foot wide, covered in dirt and broken glass, and beyond these, securing us in our prison, were strong metal wires running vertically and horizontally to create a grid, with squares each slightly smaller

than a stamp. These wires were so strong they may as well have been bars—but unfortunately for the terrorists they weren't bars, they were wires, and wires can be cut. And looking at the wires in front of the window under which I slept, anybody could tell that once upon a time that was exactly what had happened.

Our keeper's name was Abu Ali, but apart from the name he had nothing in common with the Abu Ali who'd delighted in tormenting us at the villa. This Abu Ali was soft-spoken and respectful; our first clue to his character came one night early on, when the three of us were hungry.

"I'm gonna knock on the door and ask for more food," I said.

"Don't do it," warned the Moroccan.

I asked Theo what he thought and he said I should knock, so with the majority ruling I began to pound on the door in short intervals, loudly enough to be heard upstairs. After my first round was ignored I started up again—and this time got a response in Arabic.

"What'd he say?" I asked the Moroccan.

He told me someone had said he was coming, so I ran back to my bed and assumed the position. After a few minutes the door opened and Abu Ali entered.

"Who knocked on the door?" he asked.

"He did!" cried Theo, pointing at me before I could say a word.

I couldn't believe it. He'd encouraged me to knock hoping I would be punished, making this the second time my fellow American had tried to get me beaten by the guards.

"Food, please," I said in Arabic, still facing the wall.

Abu Ali answered my request with a long monologue that I didn't understand, but it didn't sound angry or threatening. When he left, the Moroccan explained that Abu Ali had said we were his guests, and that if we were ever hungry, all we had to do was knock. Not too long after that, three pieces of bread were delivered to us, along with a hot dish of eggs and tomatoes.

At the warehouse I'd had weights and plenty of room to distance myself from these two, but now I couldn't get more than a few feet away from them. I would have thought we'd be at each other's throats, but it wasn't so bad, mostly because Abu Ali supplied us with everything we asked for: pens and paper, a two-thousand-page Koran in English, soap, detergent, a laundry bucket, toothbrush, and even a book to teach Theo how to write in Arabic. He may have

been a jihadi, but he was a good man, and a good Muslim. In the early days we'd often hear him say the same thing as he entered the cell, in a heaved sigh:

"God, what are we doing?"

This didn't mean Theo couldn't piss him off. Once, Abu Ali came in to drop off our food, and after the usual greeting while we all faced the wall, he suddenly started flipping out on Theo for what seemed like no reason. After he left I looked over to the Moroccan for an explanation. It was Theo's ass crack—it had been staring Abu Ali in the face, which was *haram*.

"What are you, a little kid?" the Moroccan asked him. "We have to tell you to pull up your pants?"

I just shook my head.

We didn't know what the argument was about or who'd started it, only that it quickly spiraled out of control.

"We don't care!" yelled a jihadi somewhere upstairs. "We're here to die!"

The Moroccan stood by the door with his ear to the gap, translating as Theo and I listened, not missing a syllable. Whoever was flipping out up there was definitely not a member of the group holding us—nor was he alone or intimidated in any way.

"They're Egyptians," said the Moroccan. "They're speaking straight Arabic, like me."

After a few more minutes of arguing the yelling stopped, and the Moroccan returned to his bed. Five minutes after that, all hell broke loose. There was no short spray from an AK-47 setting it off, just a huge coordinated concentration of firepower at the rear of the building—where we were. Seconds later the gunshots doubled as our holders began to return fire.

Boom! Boom!

"Shit!" I yelled. "They're tossing grenades!"

The second blast sounded like it hadn't fallen far from our windows.

"Let's go in the bathroom," I said, standing.

The Moroccan immediately got up as well, but Theo just sat there.

"No," he said. "Why?"

I explained that if one of those grenades landed next to the windows it was going to turn whatever was in the grain bags into a hundred thousand little BBs shooting our way, not to mention cost us some of our hearing. A few seconds

later the three of us were all crammed into the bathroom as the fighting continued outside. Abdelatif's face was a mask of fear.

"*Allah Akbar!*" a jihadi screamed as the fighting died down.

"Someone's dead," said the Moroccan.

A few moments later we heard the *Adhan*, and the most peculiar thing happened: the jihadis all split so they could go and pray. One second they were outside our window killing each other, and the next they were carting off their dead because it was time to kneel.

On the night of July sixteenth, a group of jihadis trooped down the stairs and gathered outside our door. We never received visitors this late, and the tension in the air as we turned to face the wall was almost tangible; something unholy was about to happen.

"There's *a lot* of people out there," the Moroccan whispered, sounding concerned.

"Yeah," I replied.

The door opened and several men entered the cell. One walked straight up to the Moroccan.

"What's your name, Sheikh?" the man asked.

"Abdelatif," the Moroccan answered reluctantly.

They told him to stand and follow them out of the room. As they all left, one of the men locked the door behind them. Alone, Theo and I sat and looked at each other in shock.

As one hour turned into two and two into three, it soon became apparent that the Moroccan was not coming back. It was surreal to finally be rid of this beast of a man after spending almost every second in his company for the past four months. I remembered praying many times for our captors to either let him go or kill him already, just to make my life a little easier. Now he was gone . . . all 230 pounds of him, and once I realized this I looked at Theo and pointed to the grate with the shoddy repair job.

"Do you think you could get out that window?" I asked.

His answer was yes.

In 1995 I was sixteen years old, but had packed what seemed then like a lifetime of suffering into my decade and a half. I lived in Deer Park out on Long Island with my mother, who held down two jobs to pay for our modest two-bedroom

apartment that was built into the side of a house where the garage used to be. She was an extremely loving and hard-working woman who was accustomed to getting weekly phone calls at work thanks to whatever nonsense I had gotten myself into at school. I was far from dumb but never much of a student, and my life mainly revolved around raves, clubs, fighting, and partying until I couldn't find the fucking door.

Most of my friends came up the same way as I did or worse, and by my sophomore year we were ready to graduate from smoking pot and dropping ecstasy to something much worse. Our reign of terror began on a steel-gray day, after I'd beeped my friends to pick me up early from school. We found ourselves driving through a wealthy town nearby, passing one big house after another, all with empty driveways. Nobody was talking as the radio played.

"Yo, let's rob a house," I said.

And that was all it took. Within a few weeks we'd hit so many houses I'd lost count, and I decided to bow out before we got caught. My friends, on the other hand, were just getting started, and by the time they discovered they weren't cut out to be career burglars it was too late. By then the cops had several accurate descriptions of the car, and one day after school my friends got pulled over and that was that.

Unfortunately, my absence wouldn't keep me out of trouble. My friend driving the car had decided to drop a few tabs of acid earlier that day, and it was just my luck that they started to kick in right before his interrogation. He gave a full confession, and even spelled my last name for the detectives.

Since it was my first offense, the judge let me off easy, with sixty days of county time—two-thirds of which I served in Riverhead's maximum security prison on the east end of Long Island. When I walked onto the minor tier it didn't take long to realize I didn't stand a chance against most of the brothers there in a fight. The majority of them looked like grown men, while I don't even think I had my sideburns in yet, and I knew my survival would come down to balls and making people like me, the second being impossible without the first. It was a valuable experience, living with murderers and violent offenders and actually becoming close with some of them. I would later apply the same logic to my interactions with the emirs and guards, and it would work just as well on them. It's funny—in America the criminals are the ones you do your time with, but in Syria they're the ones who run the prisons.

After someone who was supposed to be a close friend ratted me out, I had learned the hard way to be careful who to trust in life, but I'd also learned how to

break into places successfully, which meant that if I really applied myself I could learn how to break out of them as well.

Since his last brilliant idea for an escape got us tortured and starved for over a month, this time Theo let me do the planning.

The key, obviously, was finding a way to exploit the piss-poor job the welder had done when fixing the grate on the window. It was too high for me to inspect, so Theo got on all fours and I stepped onto his back so it was at eye level. The grate had twenty-three vertical wires woven around thirteen thicker wires going horizontally, and at a glance you couldn't even tell it was welded on at all. I thought I might be able to just yank it off, but it didn't budge. I tried again, summoning all my strength and thinking about my poor old mother, and got the same results—nothing.

“Oh well, there goes that idea,” said Theo, sounding relieved.

“No, fuck that!” I said, to let him know I was just getting started.

When they fed us I hid one of the metal spoons in the bathroom, and later I tried to break the bond of the weld by prying it with the handle.

“Is it working? Is it working?” Theo kept asking as I stood on his back.

“Would you shut the fuck up? I'll let you know if it works!”

He started bitching at me to get off him, saying that I had better be nicer or he wasn't going to help us escape. How serious he was I would have to wait to find out, because a 285-pound wrench was about to be thrown into my spokes before I even got a chance to pedal.

I think his name was Abdullah, though to be perfectly honest I'm not sure that's right. What I do remember is that the door opened, and when it shut a second later, Abdullah was locked inside. At first I thought he was a member of the organization coming to interrogate us, but in fact he was a dentist, and one of the sweetest men I met during my time in Syria. He was very tall, towering above me with a huge belly that made him look pregnant. He'd been arrested by Jabhat al-Nusra after somebody in his town made a bogus complaint against him about some stolen dental office equipment.

It didn't take Theo more than a split second to crouch down next to our new cellmate like a buzzard and start trying to win him over as an ally. The question I got from Abdullah after his first exchange with Theo in Arabic actually amused

me.

“Why do you beat him?” he asked me in English, disgusted.

“Because he asks for it,” I answered, without shame.

I can just imagine what kind of bullshit Theo fed him. Where I come from, when a man slaps a woman he’s beating her, but when a man slaps another man it’s just a slap. He probably made me sound like Ike Turner.

Abdullah had a wife and four little girls that he had not been permitted to call. The pain of being away from his family and not knowing how long it would be before he could see them again ripped him apart—and the fact that this was happening during Ramadan, which was now in full swing, made it even worse. Sometimes he’d sit on his bed weeping, wiping the tears away out of embarrassment as soon as they left his eyes.

Because Abdullah was older we gave him the mattress, though he pretended not to want it. He was local, from Aleppo, and knew pretty much exactly where we were, if not the building we were in. We were in the Sh’ar district, about a thousand yards from the hospital where we’d first been kept. When I asked him which direction the hospital was he pointed northwest, which meant if I ever did get out of the window, I would have to go south. It was easy to figure out directions because the guards always let us know which way Mecca was so that we could face it for prayer. At one point, they threw a mechanic from the other cell in with us for about half an hour, and it was through him that we found out exactly where we were: the transportation building, which was kind of like the Syrian DMV.

After I asked Abdullah the directions of a few other landmarks in the area I was familiar with, I had him draw me a map and sketch out who controlled what territory. These days, the city was pretty much split in half between the rebels and the regime.

Abdullah’s tears were pitiful, but they also suggested that he would have a newfound hatred for Jabhat al-Nusra after he was released, so I decided to let him in on the escape to see if we could recruit him to pick us up once we were out. It was risky, but with no money and no passport it didn’t hurt to have a friend, and I knew there was no way they were going to keep this guy for more than a few days.

Abdullah didn’t hide the fact that he didn’t think we had a chance in hell of escaping, but he said if we managed to pull it off he would try to help, and gave

us his cell phone number. Once I'd thought about it, though, I decided the number was useless. If he wasn't willing to be waiting somewhere in a car for us the day after his release, then we couldn't trust him enough to call, either. There was no way this crybaby was going to risk his life and that of his family to help a couple of Americans. If we got out and used that number, there was a good chance we'd find some al-Nusra boys waiting for us wherever we went next.

No. If I got out that window, I was on my own.

Abdullah wrote so many letters to the emir detailing his references and all the free dental work he'd done for the al-Nusra fighters controlling his neighborhood that Abu Ali kept having to bring him more paper. When he didn't get a response, what he got was desperate, and desperate men in desperate times do desperate things without thinking or because they just don't know better. In Abdullah's case, this meant grabbing our broom and shoving the broken end of the stick through the flawed wires, poking at one of the grain bags blocking our window. His plan was to flag down a civilian and pass him a note to take to his family. I bugged out and grabbed the broom handle, and as I was yelling at him to stop he managed to push one of the bags over slightly, enough to give us a clear view of almost everything outside our window. This was not good. Our guards probably wouldn't notice during the day but I was sure they would at night, when the lights were on. For the rest of the day I just walked around in circles, waiting for the sun to set. If they noticed we were in deep shit, but then again if they didn't we had just improved our odds of escaping, because now I could monitor everything going on outside.

The building directly across the street from us had been completely destroyed by artillery. All that remained were three or four floors' worth of rubble. On the side street, apartment buildings stood four or five stories and were still in good living condition—and occupied. When the electricity went on we could see several window fans spinning the hot summer air. As for the building we were in, it had a small parking lot in the rear with a tall white wall around it and an entrance at the far right with a security booth next to it.

By the following day, not only had they not noticed the bag was moved, I'd noticed something myself: there was never a guard stationed in the back.

On the twenty-third of July, the door opened and Abdullah was taken from the room, never to return.

It was time to go home.

From the moment Abdullah left I spent every conscious second planning the escape, and first up was figuring out how to remove the wires from the window. Theo wasn't much help because he'd gone back to sleeping all day with both of his hands stuffed down his pants, which was driving me nuts, and the sight of this only made me more motivated to get the hell out of that room. After my second attempt to get the window free with the spoon failed he'd said he was out, snapping "You had your chance" before going back to sleep. His lack of interest in the planning process sometimes made me think he didn't really want to leave at all.

Since Theo was no longer letting me stand on his back, I took the bucket that we had been given to wash our laundry in and flipped it over to use as a stool. Unfortunately, the bucket wasn't high enough. I needed another six- to eight-inch boost, so I folded up a few of my blankets, stacked them on the bucket, and at last stood at eye level with this sloppy, sorry excuse for a cage. As I stared at the wires, I thought of characters from movies and literature who had been in similar situations, and asked myself how they'd managed to get out of them. The characters that came most immediately to mind were the velociraptors from *Jurassic Park*: I remembered how they'd systematically tested the electrified wires holding them in, never touching the same spot twice, so I decided to do the same. I started by shaking each vertical wire in the window grate individually. None of them were welded in place and the tops of every one wiggled freely, while the bottoms were jammed tightly into the tiny gap in the window frame where the glass used to be. These wires were paper-clip-thin and would bend easily. Then I moved on to the horizontals, which were much thicker and harder to bend, quality steel, and found that only three of the thirteen were welded on, and *only* on the left side. The entire screen had simply been woven together before it was welded in these three spots and was held together by tension alone.

As soon as I figured it out, I smiled.

"Gotcha," I said.

I woke Theo up and explained that if we unwove the verticals we could bend the horizontals back and create an opening big enough to slide through. I had been watching out the window since Abdullah moved the grain bag and was absolutely certain there was never a guard stationed in the rear of the building. On some nights shots rang out from the rooftop across the street next to the bombed-out building, which meant there was a sniper stationed where—if he saw us—he would have a clean shot as soon as one of us stuck his head out the window. Because of this, and since it was my plan, I volunteered to go first—

which Theo had no problem agreeing to.

When I suggested that we split up once we were out for our own safety, Theo was all for it. It was obvious he wanted to get away from me just as much as I did from him. Since he wouldn't be with me, I had to get a head start on learning the Arabic I'd need to communicate once I was free. The phrases I needed were simple: *Please help me! I was kidnapped by criminals! I'm a Canadian! Where's the Free Syrian Army?* The rest I knew. I figured it was safer to say I was kidnapped by criminals—if they knew I'd been held by al-Nusra, whatever FSA group I managed to link up with might get scared enough to give me back.

Besides getting the wires off, the most crucial piece was timing. There was never really a *safe* time. Our best bet for getting out without being seen was to do it under the cover of darkness, but we both knew we couldn't walk around Aleppo at night without getting either shot or snatched all over again. So we had to get out of the window while it was still dark, but minutes before sunrise. During a normal month a pre-sunrise escape would be almost as dangerous as any other time because everyone wakes up so early to pray and many stay awake after that. But luckily, this wasn't a normal month: this was Ramadan—and during Ramadan, the dawn prayer marked the beginning of a fourteen-hour fast. Instead of staying up after they were done praying, during Ramadan the majority of the jihadis went right back to sleep, because nobody wanted to be up for fourteen hours in the Syrian heat without being able to eat or even drink water.

This meant that the dawn prayer would be the fixed point our entire escape would revolve around. Abu Ali would come down with our breakfast early in the morning as usual so that we could eat before prayer, and he wouldn't return until evening when he brought our dinner. Meaning if we got out, we would have a fourteen-hour head start before anyone even knew we were gone.

Theo and I agreed that we could get out by unweaving the vertical wires just down to the “third rail,” which was what I called the lowest welded horizontal wire, then folding the verticals down over it and sliding out the top. The verticals would remain held in place by the remaining horizontal and where they were jammed into the bottom of the frame, which meant I could work on unweaving them for a day or so before we planned to leave, folding them back up so that nobody would notice at a glance.

The only problem now was how to get Theo level with the window so I

could pull him out after I was through. I got the idea of making a rope out of our tee shirts to tie around the iron window frame, leaving a loop at the other end for his foot. Theo could then step into the loop while on the bucket, put his head, arms, and shoulders through the window frame, and then use the rope to hoist the bottom half of his body up so that it was horizontal with the window, while I pulled.

Theo was slightly thicker than me, and as a fail-safe in case he wasn't gliding through the window with ease I figured we needed some kind of lube for his chest and arms, and I knew exactly where to find it. For Ramadan Abu Ali prepared a beautiful feast for us every morning before prayer. It usually included a bowl filled with olives that he would pour in from a jar. Naturally, along with the olives the bowl would fill up with olive oil, so I began to transfer this to one of our chai cups, which I stashed in the bathroom. When I told Theo about the oil, he rolled his eyes and accused me of "overthinking everything." The mechanics of the escape sounded relatively straightforward, and if the window had been just a few inches taller, getting through would have been the easy part. As it was, it would take preparation, strength, and agility, especially for Theo, who would have no one pushing him, and I was the only one preparing. When I tried to get him to practice, or even just make sure his shoulders actually fit through the window, I always got the same answer: "Shut up."

I started unweaving the vertical wires the day after Abdullah left, two days before we planned to leave. Theo got on his hands and knees, and I stood on his back and got to work. I could have used the bucket but Theo needed a sense of purpose, and this gave it to him. The first wire snapped from being bent back and forth again and again as I wove it downward, and I realized that I'd have to undo the grate with as few bends as possible, visualizing how I would bend and pull each wire before doing so. Luckily, this worked, and the first wire I snapped was also the last I snapped. Unfortunately, this meant it would take a lot longer than I'd expected.

"How you doin'?" Theo kept asking from under me. "Where are you?"

"Shut the fuck up already!" I yelled down.

"All right, get off me! I'm not helping if you're going to talk to me like that! You have to be nice to me or forget it!"

He was dead serious, too—from the second we'd decided to escape he threatened to keep us both there anytime he didn't like my attitude or I insulted

him, which was about every eight seconds.

By nightfall, the day after Abdullah left us, all the wires were unraveled and ready to go. All we had to do was fold down the screen, help each other out the window, and we were home free.

The day before the escape I'd figured it was worth a shot to ask Abu Ali for a couple of razors—after all, he had given us everything else we had asked for. I'd said I wanted them so that we could shave our faces, and after he'd dropped our food that evening I turned and saw two yellow disposable razors on the prayer rug. There was absolutely no way we could shave our long, thick beards with those blades, but luckily I had no intention of using them to shave my face.

After dinner that night, it was time to put those razors to good use. Since we were in Syria, shaving our faces wasn't exactly going to help us blend in, but I wanted to change my appearance however I could for when the hounds inevitably came hunting. Because I was always facing the wall, the only part of me our captors knew was the back of my head, so I opted to shave that so I wouldn't quite match whatever description went out for me. It was a good idea, but I overestimated the power of those razors—before I was halfway finished both blades were so dull I had to press them extra hard against the back of my skull to get them to work. By the end I had dozens of tiny cuts all over my head, but eventually I finished the job and walked out of the bathroom, with my head still dripping wet.

“The horror! The horror!” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Theo didn't get it.

After Abu Ali supplied us with paper and a pen the first thing I did was make a deck of cards, so to keep our minds occupied we played Crazy Eights, and for once we seemed to get along without even trying. When we weren't playing and he was awake, Theo sat against the wall, reading the Koran.

“I just got to the dawn prayer,” he said.

“Read it.”

“Lord of this day of judgment. You alone do we worship and you alone do we ask for help. Lead us along the straight path, the path of those upon whom You have bestowed Your favors, not those who incurred Your wrath, nor of those who went astray!”

I had never heard anything more appropriate. It seemed like fate—and so

before my departure I left the Koran on my pillow, opened to the dawn prayer, for Kawa to find.

“Don’t fuck with the Koran,” Theo said, warningly.

“No, I’m fuckin’ with it,” I replied.

This was the perfect touch, almost poetic: a *fuck you* to al-Nusra from their precious Americans.

It was a long night. Theo insisted on making the rope; we ripped almost all of our extra tee shirts into long thin strips and sat for two hours braiding, Theo then tying the pieces together. After an hour I volunteered to take over but he refused. Around midnight we turned out the lights so it would look like we were sleeping, just in case anyone came down to check on us.

I sat in the darkness and thought about one thing. I didn’t think about my mother, my friends, or my home—I thought of nothing but getting through that window.

As the hours wound on, Theo and I were running back and forth to the toilet, sick with nerves. Upstairs, it was quiet. Finally, we began to hear the sounds of men moving around and knew that breakfast would be coming; soon, we heard Abu Ali heading down the stairs.

When the door opened, Theo and I were staring at the wall as usual after hearing his warning knock. From Abu Ali’s perspective, the only thing that was different was my head—I’d tied the white cloth Obeida had used to blindfold me over it like a bandana so he wouldn’t know I’d shaved it. We said good morning like we always did and within a minute he was back outside, locking the door behind him. He hadn’t noticed the window, so we were good to go.

Abu Ali had hooked us up with hot tea and the usual massive Ramadan breakfast of champions, and I stuffed my face like I would have on any normal day, eating most of Theo’s share because he wasn’t hungry. Then I hit the lights and we began to prep the room for the escape. When everything was in place we sat in silence, waiting for the *Adhan* to blare out from every mosque in the city for the dawn prayer, which would mean the countdown was officially on.

Once I’d figured out how to free up the window I spent every morning staring at the sky, studying the light so I could time everything just perfectly. We needed to get out that window ten minutes before daylight to avoid being seen by anyone who happened to look down from the apartment buildings or the roof.

In a way it was the perfect job for me—I'd been a film student and a photographer, and both mediums boil down to the same thing: the study and capture of light. During one of these study sessions, Theo walked up behind me.

“Maybe they'll let us go tomorrow,” he said.

“I don't want them to let us go anymore,” I'd replied. “I wanna escape.”

Now, as the *Adhan* echoed outside, we could hear all the jihadis in the building running up the stairs to pray. All we had to do now was wait for them to finish praying and go to sleep, and then for the right light in the sky.

“We're goin' home, Theo,” I said. “We're goin' home.”

As I looked up I could tell that the sky was about to start changing color. It was time to get to work.

Theo got down on all fours and I jumped up and removed the ten horizontal wires that weren't welded on and tossed them aside. Once these were out of the way, I bent down all of the verticals. Lastly, I grabbed the top two thick horizontals, bending them back behind the frame.

“Shit!” I said. “They both snapped off!”

There was nothing to do about it now; I jumped down. Theo tied the rope to the frame and I laid a blanket that had been folded to the exact width of the windowsill over the wires. We grabbed the few items we'd each chosen to take: I had my hat, slippers, and the *mesbahah* that Ayman had given me, along with an extra tee shirt to tie around my head Arab-style to help me blend in. Theo had his sneakers and toothbrush.

For some reason, instead of boosting me up Theo insisted that I use the rope for myself as well, saying “I don't want to help you until I have to.” I put my foot through the loop; as soon as I put my weight on it, the loop tore in half.

“Shit!” I said.

“Forget the rope! Just go!”

There was no time to argue—Theo locked his hands together and hoisted me up like a cheerleader, and I maneuvered my arm, head, and shoulders through the interior frame with Theo pushing from beneath. The next thing to go wrong was the blanket—it was too thick and got in the way, so I tossed it onto the floor. Then, with one arm extended in front of me and the other pinned to my side, I slowly began to make my way through the outside frame of the window, where the wires had been. I got one arm through. Then I got my head out. And then, with Theo pushing as hard as he could, I found myself wedged at the shoulder,

unmoving, between the third rail and the frame. As I tried to force my way through, pushing off of Theo's hands with all my strength, I realized that if I wasn't fitting, Theo never would, and I began to panic.

"I'm stuck! I'm stuck!" I cried out in a whisper.

By the time I got back down I was soaked with perspiration. The wires were a mess and the sun was starting to rise. If somebody came in or walked by and saw this we would be tortured until we were begging for death. For a full minute I paced back and forth, trying to come up with a solution as the sweat poured down my head.

"Get down," I said. "I have to put it back together."

Somehow, I managed to rig it so it looked like it had before. I folded the verticals back up and wedged the tops of them tightly against the roof of the frame, then slid the horizontals through. When it was as good as it was going to get I hopped down and had Theo examine it. We put the rest of the room back in order, and then we both lay down on our beds. I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours and was exhausted, not to mention devastated. We had been certain we could both fit through with the third rail still in place, but were both wrong. Now we had a big problem on our hands as soon as someone inspected the room, which was bound to happen sooner or later.

I slept, kind of. Really, I drifted off into an uneasy doze, thinking about the window and the wires, and my shoulder stuck against the frame. When I woke up, with daylight illuminating the room, I knew what we had to do.

"We have to remove the third rail," I told Theo. "We have to remove the third rail and go with two arms extended like Superman, so our shoulders don't get in the way."

Theo didn't respond. He just lay in his usual position with his shirt over his eyes to block out the sun. I repeated myself, louder.

"Okay," he said, without moving.

"All right!"

All day I did laps and psyched myself up. When Theo finally woke, it was night.

"Yo, you ready to go?" I asked enthusiastically.

"No, I'm not following you anymore," he snapped. "You don't have the athletic ability or physical strength to pull it off."

"But you said this morning you would go!"

“I just said that so you’d shut up and let me sleep.”

I was *livid*. I’d spent all day mentally preparing myself to risk death and this pussy says he lied to me so he could sleep!

“Okay, fuck you, you can stay here then,” I said, heading into the bathroom.

When I came out I had the laundry bucket in my hands so I could use it instead of Theo as my stepping stool.

“You do it and I’m going to knock on the door,” he said.

“What? You’re gonna tell al-Qaeda on me? What kind of an American are you? What are you gonna tell people when we get home?”

“I’ll tell my side.”

“Which is what?”

“You’re endangering my life.”

“I’m trying to save your life!” I said, exasperated. “You know what? Fuck you, go ahead, knock!”

And as I made a move to step toward the window, he did just that. I couldn’t believe how easily he did it, how swiftly and loudly he banged on that door. The sound echoed up the stairs where we could hear the jihadis and they could definitely hear us. The look on Theo’s face was one of pure confidence, the look of a man who has people on his side. My heart sank as he looked me straight in the eye with his chest out, without an ounce of regret. He really was going to rat me out to the terrorists holding us.

After a few seconds passed and there were no feet on the stairs I lunged at him, ready to smash the bucket over his head and do what I should have done a long time ago—beat him within an inch of his life, or maybe even a few inches past it, but at the last moment I stopped and fought to compose myself. If I smashed that bucket in his smug fucking face I knew he would never agree to try again. I had to calm down and win him over. First I appealed to his love for his mother.

“Come on, Theo, don’t you wanna go home to your mother? Don’t you wanna spare her from seeing her only son get his head chopped off online?”

But my words had absolutely no effect on him, so the second tactic I employed was trying to exploit his terrorist-sympathizing tendencies.

“Come on, Theo! 9/11 didn’t work out the first time! It took two attempts!”

Again I got nowhere, so as a last-ditch effort, I even tried Eminem.

“Theo, if you had one shot—one opportunity to seize everything you’ve ever wanted in one moment would you capture it, or just let it slip?”

Let it slip, was basically his answer. After this it didn't take me long to realize what had to be done: I had to make him *so fucking miserable* that he would rather die than spend another second in that room with me . . .

. . . It took about three hours.

To start, I confiscated the Koran, which he loved to read almost as much as he loved sleeping.

"Give it to me or I'm going to tell Abu Ali!" he cried. "He wants me to read it!"

"No, I'm sorry," I said coldly. "That's not gonna happen."

This got Theo about as mad as I'd seen him, and before I knew it he was standing above me and I rose to meet his aggressive stare.

"You're going to give me that Koran!" he yelled.

"No, I'm not," I said, calmly.

He grabbed me by my wrists and shoved me into the wall with the scariest face he could muster, his nose inches from mine.

"Get off of me," I said.

"I can kick your ass!"

"I said get off me," I repeated, still calm, but slightly louder.

"I can kick your—"

I didn't let him finish the sentence. When my forehead collided with his it made a sound like the crack of one pool ball hitting another, loud enough that it could probably be heard on the other side of the door. The head butt sent him staggering backward and busted him open like a grape. Blood flowed into his eye; on his forehead was a large round gash about the size of a bullet hole.

"Give me the Koran!" he yelled, coming at me again.

"You want more?"

I took him down on top of the prayer rug, but didn't hit him again, just grabbed his wrists and pinned him. He struggled, thrashing around like a child having a tantrum.

"Theo, calm down! Stop it!" I yelled.

"I want that Koran!"

No matter how hard I tried to calm him he would not stop fighting, so I threw him into a headlock and got comfortable on the prayer rug.

"Theo, I can sit like this *all* night," I said, applying some pressure.

"Okay," he said after a few seconds, and tapped out.

A second after I got to my feet so did Theo. The blood was still streaming from the wound on his forehead, but he ignored it.

“Give me the Koran,” he said.

And he came at me again, but this time I didn’t humor him—I threw up my fists, charging him like a bull. He backed up until he was against the wall, crouched over and holding his hands in front of his face to block the punches he thought were coming. Instead I tapped his face again and again with my fingertips.

“You see, Theo! These could be punches! You see? Now stop it! You’re not getting that Koran!”

I left him and took a seat on my bed. Then I started to laugh. An American Jew pretending to be a German-American Christian pretending to be a Sunni Muslim, and an atheist pretending to be a Christian had just gotten into a fight over a Koran.

Only in fucking Syria.

Theo sat on his bed, bleeding and sulking.

“It looks like someone shot you in your fuckin’ forehead,” I said, laughing.

“You hit like a girl. And you’re bleeding, too,” he said.

“No, that’s your blood, dipshit,” I said, wiping my forehead. I started back in again, continuing my verbal assault, nagging him into letting me save his life.

I don’t even remember what I was saying when he finally capitulated.

“All right!” he said, defeated. “I didn’t say I was completely turned off to the idea!”

“Yes! Here you go,” I said, getting up and returning the Koran to him.

“But we have to wait three days,” he added.

“What? Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But Theo, in three days they could find the window, put someone else in here with us again, or move us—and we’re due!” I said. With the exception of the warehouse they’d always moved us every month or month and a half; we were up for a transfer any day now and he knew it.

None of this made any difference to him. He finally had a situation that put him in control.

“You also have to be nice to me. If you’re not nice to me, forget it.”

This was his other condition for letting me spare him from death. I had to be nice to him too. I agreed to the three days because I saw there was no way around it. However, being nice to him turned out to be much harder.

Over the next three days I did my best to get Theo to wake up and practice, but he refused. He was back to sleeping eighteen to twenty hours a day, and no matter how hard I tried there was nothing I could do to motivate him to get with the program. All day I would plead with him to get up and tie the rope around the window frame to get a feel for exactly what he needed to be able to accomplish physically, but he always responded either confrontationally or by offering some nonsensical reason as to why he didn't need to prepare.

“Come on, Theo, get up! Practice!” I said.

“I don't need to. I used to go spelunking.”

“What? What the fuck is spelunking?” I said, losing my mind.

“It's caving. I know how to contort my body.”

“What are you, out of your mind?” I yelled. “We're trying to escape from a terrorist prison here! We have a lot more to worry about than getting our arm jammed between a rock and a hard place for a hundred and twenty-seven hours!”

“I never saw that movie,” he said.

“Ahhhh!” I screamed, gripping both sides of my head in frustration.

He also refused to use the olive oil, or listen to me when I tried to explain why he needed to go with both arms out. I don't know how I didn't lose it. It wasn't enough that I had to go first and deal with the possibility of the sniper seeing me. That I had to plan out every single detail. That I had to stay awake and monitor everything happening outside the door and the window while he slept. No—I had to deal with this bullshit, too.

After a while I just gave up and let him sleep. It was no use trying to get through to him. He was done.

Waiting those three days was literally a torture unlike any I had faced at the hands of al-Nusra. As the first day came and went, so did Abu Ali, without ever noticing the window. I stayed as active as possible, played memory with the deck of cards to keep my mind sharp, and continued to pray for my freedom and to be reunited with my family. At night, Theo would usually come out for a little while to read the Koran and play cards, and we got along pretty well for those few hours.

“If they catch us again they’re never going to let us go,” he said, tossing out a card.

“I know, but there’s a good chance they’re never gonna let us go anyway,” I answered.

As we were playing on the second night, a single rifle shot rang out from the rooftop across the street. We looked at each other, knowing damn well that rifle might be there waiting for us the morning after next, but it was just another one of the grim realities we had to live with, so neither one of us said a word.

Finally, it was the night of July twenty-eighth. *By this time tomorrow, I will be a free man*, I thought, and never stopped thinking it for a single second, letting it play in the background of my head like a heartbeat. As I’m sure you can imagine, it wasn’t easy getting Theo into warrior mode.

“You ready to go home, Theo?” I’d say, “You ready, Theonidas? You ready? Zero Dark Theo! Yeah!” I would jump and pound my fist into my hand.

From what I could tell, my efforts to convince him that he was qualified to walk around with “Bad Motherfucker” branded on his wallet actually worked. At one point in the hours leading up to the escape he wandered up to the window, staring at it.

“It’s almost Zero Dark Thirty,” he said.

We had both gotten so used to the idea of being killed that I don’t think either one of us was afraid of it anymore. All we were afraid of now was time, and how viciously they were certain to torture us if we got caught. During the three days we waited, I’d decided that once I made it through that window, it was either freedom or death for me. I was not going to be taken back to the transportation building alive; I made sure to have more than enough diarrhea pills to do the job if I got cornered, and just in case I had some other capsules we had been given when I got sick.

Once it got late, we turned out the lights to wait for our breakfast. The last time I’d stared at the window all night long, envisioning myself getting out of it, but this time instead I thought of everything that had happened leading up to this moment. I thought of Ayman, Shareef, Ali, and all the other friends and brothers I had made during my captivity. I thought about Pops, who I’d lost, and before long I began to realize that what I had told the Leader that night at the warehouse was true. I was glad I had come to Syria. It really had made me a better person, a stronger person, and now I was going to use that strength to do what those

bastards upstairs thought I never would—prevail.

Once the lights were out time seemed frozen. Finally, we began to hear the jihadis moving around and knew Abu Ali would be down shortly with our last meal in captivity. When he'd left and we turned from the wall, our breakfast was laid out in front of us on a silver tray, with two cups of steaming hot tea.

“To freedom,” I said, holding up my cup.

As usual Theo ate like a bird and I ate like a horse, saving nothing but the olive oil and yogurt for Theo to use as lube in case he decided to follow my plan.

When we heard the *Adhan* for the dawn prayer we knew the clock was running for the second and last time. In an hour and a half we would either be free, dead, or wishing they'd kill us to end the torture.

My heart hadn't raced when I was kidnapped, but it felt like it was punching its way through my chest as I stared up at the sky waiting for the right light to blossom out of the silence. Most of the jihadis had been done praying for a while now and the noise upstairs was at a minimum, which meant most had gone back to sleep. With the Koran opened to the dawn prayer on my pillow for Kawa to find, and all of our gear rolled up and ready to be handed out the window to me the second I was through, I watched as the sky's tone lifted until it was just as I wanted it to be.

“Let's go!” I said.

Theo was on all fours and I was up on his back getting to work on the screen. At first I removed the horizontals carefully in case I had to put the whole thing back together again, but I quickly realized that if I approached the task with that kind of mentality we were doomed to failure and started ripping out the wires like the caged beast I had become. When I had torn out enough verticals and folded the third rail backward, it snapped, just like I'd known it would. There was no way to put the window back together now and no turning back; we either got out or got fucked. I folded down the remaining verticals to cut down on the noise and then the frame was clear and we were good to go. I jumped down and went to put my foot in the rope like I had the first time, but Theo stopped me.

“Forget the rope,” he said, cupping his hands together.

As soon as I placed my bare foot in his hands he boosted me up with all his strength, and I carefully maneuvered my arms, head, and shoulders through the window. From beneath me Theo pushed my legs up so I could inch my way

through the second opening. As I reached my arms through like Superman I pushed aside the grain bags, and before I knew it half my body was outside, but it was a tight fit. The wires that I had folded down were ripping through my tee shirt and carving cuts into my abdomen, slowing me down.

I pulled myself out a little more but got stuck around my stomach, so I sucked it in with all my might and thrust the rest of my upper body out into the great wide open as the sky was beginning to turn gray, and just when I thought I was home free I was stuck again. It was my jeans. Half out and with my legs kicking inside, I reached in and tugged on my pants so Theo could unbutton them, but he didn't get it so I sucked my stomach in again, reached for the button and started trying to get it open. After a second of fumbling, the fabric folded over the button and I slid right out the window in my underwear with my pants around my ankles, like a baby fresh from the womb. The first thing I did as I pulled on my pants was to look up. Above me were two huge wide-open windows with the lights on—and since the generator was humming and they didn't waste petrol, that meant they were in there.

I crouched down and took the clothes and shoes from Theo. Now it was his turn. The plan was no talking, but that went out the window as soon as I did.

“Take your shirt off,” I whispered to Theo. “And go with two arms! The windows above me are open and the lights are on.”

“No!” he snapped.

Theo got on the bucket, put his foot through the rope, and hoisted himself up until he could place his head and one arm through the window. He didn't take off his shirt, he didn't use the olive oil, he didn't go with two arms, and he wasn't leveling himself out with the rope, but I gripped him by his wrist and pulled with all my might anyway. After about thirty seconds to a minute it was obvious that his other shoulder wasn't fitting, and we were wasting valuable time. Finally, as I sat there exposed, he realized what I'd been trying to nail into his head for the past three days—he needed to go with both arms out.

“Theo, get in there and take off your shirt and go with two arms!” I hissed.

As he stripped off his shirt I thought about the olive oil but I knew we had to keep the talking to a minimum. For three days I had told him to use it if he didn't slide through right away, and I wasn't about to start another debate about it now with two windows open above me and a possible sniper on the roof behind me.

When he jumped up the second time, he got both of his arms and shoulders through the window and I immediately grabbed them and started pulling as hard

as I could, but he wasn't leveling out. I placed my foot against the building and pulled until it felt like my head was going to explode. As I pulled I stared into his eyes, then up at the windows, then back into his eyes, and then right back up to the windows. I was just waiting for one of them to walk over and empty a clip out into my face.

"You're not fitting!" I said.

"No, I can fit!" he cried desperately.

The sides of Theo's arms were streaming with blood from puncture wounds from the horizontal wires that stuck out from the sides of the next window over. I was still pulling, feeling every second, over three minutes by now at least, tick by. If he had gotten up and practiced just once we would have immediately realized he wasn't strong enough to hoist his lower body up and we could have amended the plan, but now it was too late, and after what felt like forever I stopped pulling and placed my mouth next to his ear.

"Theo, you're not fitting," I whispered. "I have to go. The windows above us are open. They're gonna hear us. I'll get help."

"Come back," he said desperately, after jumping back down into the cell.

"I can't come back," I replied. "I'll get help."

I sat there, waiting for him to speak as he paced. I didn't want to be known as the American who left another American behind, but even more than that I didn't want to be known as the American who foolishly sacrificed his life for someone who chose to sleep instead of preparing for something that nobody had ever accomplished before. Finally, Theo broke the silence.

"Okay, go," he said.

After I handed him back his clothes I squeezed the size nines Theo had found in the warehouse onto my size-ten feet, shoved my hat into my pocket, checked the windows, and then took off for the open gate at the back. I ran to it crouched down, but when I hit the street I popped up and immediately started walking. A civilian was approaching me, and as we passed each other we briefly made eye contact. Once he was behind me I took off running for the corner. I knew that once I rounded that corner the worst would be behind me.

I was free.

ALEPPO

JULY 29, 2013

The first building I came across had a well-lit entrance to a staircase going up. I ducked into it and stripped off my torn shirt, replacing it with the one I had planned to tie around my head. My abdomen was all chopped up from the wires, and the clean shirt stuck to my wounds as soon as I put it on. I tied the torn shirt around my head so a flap came down over my neck, Arab-style.

As I came out of the stairway I looked around to make sure all was clear and then took off heading southeast. Now all I had to do was get out of Aleppo—with no money, no passport, no cell phone, no contacts, and speaking virtually no Arabic—without getting killed, kidnapped, or turned back over to Jabhat al-Nusra. I was about to become arguably the most hunted man in one of the most dangerous cities in the world and the clock was ticking.

Fourteen hours, I said to myself. You have fourteen hours to get help before they realize you're gone.

The first person I approached was a middle-aged man with a mustache, sleeping behind the wheel of a small truck.

“Help me, please, help me!” I said in Arabic. “I was kidnapped by criminals!”

He looked right at me and made a “*Tt*” sound—meaning “No.” Seeing as he wasn’t inclined to help, I wasted no time in putting as much distance between me and that point as possible, in case he told someone he’d seen me and where. *Zigzag, zigzag, zigzag* I continued down the alley-like streets, sticking to ones that were impassable due to old roadblocks to make it harder to follow me in a vehicle.

The next people I tried were two kids in their early teens on a cart being pulled by a donkey. As I ran up to them they got scared and whipped the reins, sending the donkey into a gallop.

“Shit!” I said.

Now I had to put some distance between myself and *that* point. I decided to hook a right, and when I did I found myself looking straight at the back of a jihadi who had his AK-47 slung over his shoulder. I very quietly turned around and headed back in the direction I had come.

Before I knew it I was on a busy street in broad daylight, a few cars and trucks whizzing by. I saw an old man with a white scarf around his head coming my way, and my gut told me that this was the man who was going to save my life. I was a little surprised by his response to my halting Arabic.

“No!” he barked, in English.

“Great!” I muttered, and rushed back into the side streets.

Men sat outside in front of barbershops, and when I passed I nodded to them and met their stares. I knew they could tell I was a foreigner and I also knew they could tell I had just gone through some shit, but none looked friendly enough to trust, so I kept moving, never opening my mouth to let my accent escape me.

After about forty minutes of walking through the bombed-out city, past buildings leveled by artillery and the air force, I came upon three men just kicking it on a corner and decided to engage them. Since my pleas for help hadn’t gotten me anywhere so far, I figured I needed to change my game, and instead of acting desperate I went with confused.

“*Assallam alekum*,” I said. “Where’s the Free Syrian Army?”

As I asked this I tapped the side of my head and shook it, to make them think I’d gotten lost on my way back from somewhere.

“I am a photographer. I am a Canadian. I am a Muslim,” I said in Arabic.

None of the men spoke English, but the youngest one, who was sitting on the curb, pointed behind me in the direction I’d come from.

“You know, I just can’t find it,” I said, shaking my head. “Would you?”

The man jumped to his feet and motioned for me to follow him. We walked for a couple of minutes until we came upon a tall, bright-green metal door. The man knocked. When nobody answered he knocked again, and after a few seconds I heard the door being unlocked from the inside. When it opened, standing before me was a young jihadi of about twenty-five, wearing a black-and-blue-striped polo with a neatly groomed beard and mustache. I figured now was the time for my desperation act so I fell to my knees and begged him to help me with the most fervent Arabic I knew. When the jihadi pulled me to my feet I saw only one thing on his face: skepticism.

The man who'd led me to the door disappeared as soon as it opened. The jihadi who'd answered it let me in and searched me as we stood in the entryway, emptying my pockets and removing the shirt from my head. I could feel him contemplating me, trying to decide whether or not I was a CIA agent. By now I had told him that I was a Muslim and a Canadian photographer who'd been kidnapped by criminals. The first things he'd produced from my pockets were the pills I'd brought in case I was recaptured. Since they were loose and wrapped in plastic I admit they looked kind of shady, and he stared at me, waiting for an explanation.

"Diarrhea," I said.

He didn't speak a word of English, so I squatted and made a few short farting sounds. That cleared everything right up, and I got my first smile out of him. The next thing he produced, however, was a possible problem. It was Abdullah the dentist's phone number. The last thing I wanted was for these guys to call him and find out that I had escaped not from common criminals, but from Jabhat al-Nusra, so when the jihadi found the small strip of paper with the number on it I pretended I'd never seen it before.

"I don't know what that is," I said, shrugging. "I just got these jeans and that must have been in there."

By now all this activity by the entrance had drawn the attention of another jihadi, this one older and clearly just awakened from sleep. After a brief exchange the young man who'd answered the door returned the contents of my pockets and led me back outside. He motioned for me to sit on the curb and joined me a second later. Now everyone was awake, and the older man had come outside to stand above me, along with two more jihadis who looked to be barely out of their teens and one who looked a couple of years younger. I figured it was time for the test to see who they really were.

"You have a cigarette?" I asked, putting my fingers to my mouth.

None of the men were smoking, but as soon as I asked, the baby of the group ran inside, returning a second later holding a pack of cigarettes. He then handed me the luckiest Lucky I would ever smoke, along with a lighter. This meant that I was with the FSA and not fanatics—which also meant my odds of getting to the Turkish border had just improved tenfold.

Now I had to make a decision. Go for the border and try to help Theo from there, or try to get to the town of Hraytan, where my contacts—including an FSA commander with three hundred battle-hardened men under him—were still fighting. This commander, Sheikh Modar, was a very highly respected and

religious man, the type with clout; the type that may have been able to help no matter how much of a long shot it was. It was a no-brainer. I had to get to Hraytan. A promise is a promise.

“Hraytan, Sheikh Modar, *Ameriki* journalist,” I said holding up my hands with my wrists together to show them that another man was still in captivity.

They asked me who had him and where, but I pretended not to know. They still hadn’t even invited me inside, which worried me a little. But after about half an hour of chain-smoking the kid’s Luckies and talking, the jihadi who’d answered the door reached out, put his hand on my shoulder, and gave me a single nod that said: *Don’t worry, you’re with friends now.*

They led me inside. As we entered the building, which had been a rug factory before the war, I looked to my left and saw a large room with mattresses all over the floor and a table off to the side that had to be fifteen feet long, with AK-47s leaning against the wall on top of it. We turned to the right instead, into an empty room that led to an office where there was a desk with several chairs around it. The first thing I did was ask to use the restroom; I wanted to ditch Abdullah’s phone number so they wouldn’t be able to call him. The water was off, so instead of dropping the slip of paper down the squat toilet I ate it, and then returned to the office and took a seat in front of the desk.

Like always I figured it was a good idea to introduce myself and learn everyone’s names in order to form a bond as quickly as possible. I used my Muslim name, Nassir, as if I’d been born with it. The man who’d answered the door was Ahmed. Across from him was the eldest of the group, Ali, who looked like he was still battling to keep his eyes open, and behind the desk were the two jihadis who looked about twenty, Hamed and Osama. Baby Face came in with hot tea for everybody and we all sat quietly, sipping our chai like we were in London.

““Sexy Lady,”” Hamed said in English, breaking the silence.

“What?” I asked.

“Shaggy, ‘Sexy Lady,’” Osama answered with a smile.

And with that Hamed hit a key on the laptop in front of him and the song “Hey Sexy Lady” by Shaggy began to play. Within seconds every jihadi in the room was bopping his head to the beat, all while staring at me. Then Hamed turned the laptop toward me and I saw that they weren’t just playing the song, but the video, which was packed with sexy ladies—who I’d seen none of in almost eight months.

“Sexy Lady!” I said, jumping to my feet and sticking my face right in the screen.

Now I was bopping my head along with everyone else. It was at this moment—watching a ten-year-old Shaggy video with five head-bopping jihadis—that I knew I was safe.

It didn’t take long to go from “Hey Sexy Lady” to the cell phone videos Hamed and Osama had taken at the front. As soon as they hit play I could tell they were fighting in Karm al-Jabal, where I’d been shooting the night before I was taken. What took longer to become obvious was just how brutal these two boys were on the battlefield.

“Bashar,” Hamed said, pointing to the screen proudly.

Standing in front of the camera was Hamed, pulling a human head out of a plastic bag. Judging from the way it was starting to decay, it looked like he’d been carrying it around for a while.

I was disgusted, but tried to look impressed. The next video showed a badly mutilated body lying on the ground inside a building that had been completely destroyed by fighting.

“Mine,” said Osama, pointing to himself with his thumb and smiling.

“Very impressive,” I said, returning the smile.

After a few hours of chilling, the jihadis’ general showed up, and everyone rose as he entered. He was probably only in his late twenties, and extremely gaunt. When his eyes hit me he looked shocked, and then broke into a pleased smile.

As I shook his hand, two more jihadis entered behind him. These men were different from the guys who’d let me in and sat with me watching videos—they were older, with a commanding presence. As soon as they’d been filled in on the morning’s events they turned to me and asked for the phone number Ahmed had pulled from my pocket. Despite the fact that the number was currently in my belly being digested I started to empty my pockets onto the table as if the slip of paper were still in there, and when there was nothing left to take out I rifled through everything, pretending to look for it. I said it must have fallen to the ground outside and made a move to go and look for it, but they waved this off and told me to take a seat. By now I hadn’t slept in more than twenty-four hours, and everyone in the room could tell I was exhausted. They kept encouraging me to take a mattress in the next room and get some rest, but I refused—I had to make it to Hraytan for Theo.

At one point I wandered outside into the courtyard where the hot sun was blazing down from directly above. I couldn't remember when I'd last seen the sun, much less sat in it, and realizing I now could I took a seat against a massive pillar. It had to be close to a hundred degrees that day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but that didn't keep me from turning my face up to stare at the brightest star in the galaxy through almost closed eyes.

As I stared at it I started laughing, but within seconds I was crying as the reality of what I had gone through washed over me—along with the fact that it was finally, finally almost over. This made me laugh again, and then I was laughing and crying at the same time. Tears rushed down my face as I realized I didn't have to hide them anymore. Three little boys stood before me as all this was unfolding, looking confused by the tears and the laughter, not sure if I was happy or sad.

“Nassir,” someone called to me. It was the Sheikh, an old man who was the elder of the house. I just shook my head and pointed to the sky.

“Sun,” I said in Arabic. “Sun!”

I sat there like this for several minutes more, but eventually walked over to the Sheikh where he sat in one of the chairs in the shade. As I sat before him—ungroomed, wearing clothes that were too small and stained—I looked like a homeless person. It made me feel like an animal, out of place, and I found myself looking down, not wanting to meet his eyes. He placed his hand gently on my knee and said something very softly in Arabic. Then he took out some money and handed it to one of the little boys, who were his grandsons, sending him off on some kind of errand. When the boy returned he was carrying a black plastic bag, which he handed to his grandfather with the change. Then the boy fetched some bread, and from the bag the Sheikh produced a huge bunch of glossy green grapes and several beautiful yellow figs. Another grandson brought a metal dish, and I stared at the fruit as the Sheikh fixed a plate for me. The moment he handed it over I picked up a fig and bit into it like a Neanderthal, its juices dripping down my beard and all over my hands. Right away the Sheikh motioned for me to stop; he took a fig from the plate and, with tremendous compassion, began to peel it for me. I was so ashamed of my manners that I once again felt like an animal and began to cry, apologizing all the while for my actions. The old man seemed to understand everything I meant without knowing a word I uttered; he handed me the skinned fig and encouraged me to eat it with a piece of bread. I ate, and before I knew it I was dozing off and could refuse the offer of a bed no longer.

I thought I'd pass out as soon as my head hit the pillow, but I didn't. I just lay there facing the wall with my eyes open, stuck floating somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness. I don't know how long I lay like this, but eventually I heard my name being called from the doorway and turned over. Standing there were many of the men from before, along with two new faces. I stood up and walked over to them, and one of the newcomers greeted me in perfect English.

"How are you?" he asked.

Like the jihadi who'd let me in the door, his name was Ahmed. He was in his early twenties, with a cleanly shaven face and a cigarette burning in his hand. He had an innocent, kindhearted way about him. The other newcomer, Firas, was much the same, except he had a neatly trimmed beard and didn't speak more than a few words of English. Once our introductions were complete, Ahmed, Firas, and I sat in the courtyard and talked. Ahmed explained that he himself was not a jihadi but a humanitarian who had once lived in the area; he had a degree in English from the University of Aleppo. Now he was a refugee, living in Turkey, but luckily for me he'd been in Aleppo visiting family and friends—one of these friends was Firas, who the men from the group had called in for help.

Ahmed spoke and listened patiently; he seemed to understand the situation. But though both he and Firas seemed trustworthy, I still wasn't comfortable telling them who I'd escaped from, sticking to my story that it had been a random gang of criminals. When I told them how long I'd been held they looked amazed.

"Seven months!" Ahmed said, his eyebrows shooting to the sky.

One of the first subjects he raised was Theo.

"Do you know where the other journalist is?" he asked me. "Because the men want to go rescue him."

"No, I don't know. I walked and zigzagged through the city for over half an hour before I came here. I need to get to Hraytan. I know a commander there who may be able to help him."

"Well, you are safe now," he said.

"Safe," said Firas firmly, in English.

"Now we are going to take you to a barber to get you cleaned up, and then to an internet café, so you can contact your family."

"I'm not going out there," I told them, knowing al-Nusra could be scouring the city for me.

“Then we will bring the barber here,” Ahmed said easily.

Sure enough, a few minutes later a barber walked through the door with a box holding a mirror and his tools. I was so touched that it almost made me start crying all over again. The barber set himself up in the room leading to the office, and after walking me in there and getting me settled in a chair, Ahmed told me he and Firas were leaving but promised they’d return in a few hours.

Now I was forced to make a call. Clearly these men were the good guys from where I was sitting, and I trusted them, but this group was no match for Jabhat al-Nusra. Then I thought about what I would expect Theo to do if he’d gotten out and I was the one left back in the cell. I would expect him to do everything he could to help me, as soon as he was safely in the hands of the FSA.

“Ahmed, you swear on the Koran that if I tell you something I will be safe?” I asked.

“Yes, I already told you—you are safe,” he reassured me. “What is it?”

“I know who had me,” I said, looking up at him.

“Who? We will go get them!”

“Jabhat al-Nusra.”

“What?” he asked, his face going white.

“I was with Jabhat al-Nusra.”

“*You* escaped from *Jabhat al-Nusra*?” he said in awe. “Nobody escapes from Jabhat al-Nusra!”

“I did.”

“Come on, we have to talk some more.”

He took me back to the chairs in the courtyard, where he and Firas exchanged a few words in Arabic. Then he turned his attention back to me as I watched the barber leave out the main door.

“I am glad you told us, because this changes everything,” he explained. “The people you escaped from are going to come looking for you, so we have to get you out of here as soon as possible. We are a small group of just twenty men and the people you escaped from are just too strong. There is nothing we can do for your friend.”

I knew he was right, but I did not let this deter me. His advice was to run for the border, but I insisted that I needed to get to Hraytan. That plan crumbled a couple of hours later, when we received a visit from a few elders who informed us that Hraytan was completely besieged by the regime: it was impossible to get in or out. It was only upon receiving this news that I agreed to head for Turkey. I

had done all I could do for Theo here.

Ahmed then left with Firas and promised to return in a few hours so we could discuss a plan to get me out of Syria first thing in the morning. The clock was now ticking not only for me, but for every man in that factory; if al-Nusra discovered I was there, time would be up for all of us.

I was lying on a mattress watching WWE wrestling with the jihadis when I heard the *Adhan* for *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer. This marked the end of the fourteen hours I'd had to get help for Theo and the beginning of a new hell for him—that is, if he hadn't knocked on the door within five minutes of my escape. However, that thought didn't cross my mind when I heard the call to prayer that evening. The only thought that did was that I had failed him; that I had not kept my promise. I lowered my head in shame and closed my eyes, unable to keep from envisioning the consequences he was facing at this very moment. These feelings weren't easily concealed, and several of the men in the room asked me what was wrong.

“*Ameriki*,” I said.

They immediately understood, and left it at that.

I was the first one awake the next morning. Ahmed and Firas returned not long after, and then one by one the men began to awaken. We were sitting in the courtyard when one of the older guys entered holding a shoebox and a yellow Adidas-knockoff jumpsuit, brand new on the hanger. He called my name and I felt all warm inside knowing that they'd bought these things just for me. When I came out of the office wearing the jumpsuit everyone complimented my appearance and said I looked like one of them.

When it was finally time for the last leg of my journey out of Syria, it seemed like everyone in the group had come out to say goodbye. After we'd finished our farewells I got into the back seat of a black Cherokee between Firas and Ahmed. We all knew the ride was going to be extremely risky with all the checkpoints and my not having a passport or any cameras, so we made up a story for if we got stopped, that I'd been invited to photograph them fighting, and the apartment they'd placed me in was robbed. In the front seat were two jihadis, armed with AKs. When we started rolling I felt the butterflies dancing in my stomach. It was the first time in seven months that I'd ridden in a vehicle without a blindfold.

It was a beautiful clear day. As we cruised through Aleppo, I watched the constant bustle of the city and thought you'd never know there was a war going on if it wasn't for all the bombed-out buildings.

"This is near the hospital," Ahmed told me.

I was glad our windows were tinted and rolled up.

There were no checkpoints inside the city, but right at the edge of it there was a major one; I'd seen it before. We drove up and a jihadi with a black scarf around his head waved us right through after our driver flashed his FSA Easy Pass—an AK-47.

"All right!" I said, clapping my hands once and rubbing them together.

Thank God I had cigarettes for that ride; that's the only moment I remember when one wasn't burning in my hand. I'd told Ahmed I'd been kidnapped near the infantry school, and as the academy's wall approached I pointed out the place where it happened.

"This is right where they got me," I said, as we passed the exact spot.

Everyone in the truck smiled and Ahmed let me in on a little secret.

"You know, the guys were going to play a little joke on you and pull out the handcuffs when we passed there, but I told them you would not think that is funny."

"Well, you were right!" I said, laughing.

We came to another checkpoint. This one was manned by only two jihadis and they were already busy searching a white van they'd pulled over; our driver flashed his AK and we were waved through again. We passed through one checkpoint after another like this until we were minutes from the Turkish border, in a city I recognized as Azaz.

"You're almost there," said Ahmed.

Finally, we reached the last checkpoint. Just on the other side was the border crossing and refugee camp, which had grown in size significantly since I'd last seen it upon entering Syria. I couldn't help staring at the hundreds of new tents that had popped up, and all the children running around, some without shoes and socks. Weapons were prohibited beyond this point, and sitting there crammed in the back of the Jeep as the men handed them over, I knew I was finally out of the woods. We cruised through the checkpoint and then it was clear sailing, with freedom and Turkey in sight.

The Jeep pulled right up to the border, where the FSA stood on one side in their military fatigues, and the Turkish border agents stood on the other in crisp

white uniforms. We all got out of the car, and I could feel my world spinning as I made my way to the Turks. Ahmed said something to the agents with the little Turkish he knew, and one of them stepped aside and motioned for me to enter. Without hesitation, I stepped across the very border I had dreamed for so many hours about crossing, while locked in cell after cell. I'd always thought I would cry the second I saw the red crescent on Turkey's flag flapping in the wind, but I didn't. I just turned to the men who'd made it happen with all the gratitude I could muster up.

I hugged Firas and the rebels, who'd been allowed to take a few steps inside to see me off, and thanked them a hundred times, promising never to forget what they'd done, and one day to repay them if I could. Ahmed was the last to say goodbye, and after we hugged, this unemployed refugee handed me fifty Turkish lira. I refused to take it, and immediately that familiar Syrian stubbornness I remembered from my Alawite brothers showed itself, so I made him a deal and took twenty-five lira, with a promise to pay him back.

When I turned around, the Turkish border patrol agents had a police car waiting for me with the back door standing open. They didn't have to tell me to get inside. As I sat in the car on my way to the station I could think only one thought, over and over again, as I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the window.

I did it, I said to myself. I did it.

TURKEY

JULY 30, 2013

I sat on a couch in a small office in the big building that housed border control. Three Turks sat across from me. I could tell from their expressions that despite the new jumpsuit I still looked like I had just returned from hell—and these guys worked the Syrian border every day. When one of them finally spoke, a heavy balding man, it was in English, through a thick accent.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

I could hear the compassion in his voice, but still felt wary. I sat there looking at him for a moment.

“Am I safe?” I asked.

“Yes, you are safe,” he assured me.

So, sitting there holding a bottle of clean water, I gave him the five-minute version of the last seven months. Then I asked if I could go outside to smoke a cigarette, and when he said it was all right I was up and out in no time. When I pulled out the pack my rescuers had given me the day before, rolling around in it was a single Lucky, my last one. I laughed, remembering my last butt before getting grabbed, the one I’d defied superstition to smoke.

“I should’ve saved that cigarette,” I said to myself, lighting up.

It took the American diplomat and his assistant about two and a half hours to arrive at the border station from Adana once they heard I was there. When they pulled up I was walking around outside under the pink sky as the sun set, watching my first truly free day in seven months turn into my first truly free night.

Once we were all in the office of the border police station that stood next to border control, the first question the diplomat asked was whether I wanted to call my mother and of course I jumped at this, accepting the BlackBerry and holding it to my ear as my heart raced.

It was ringing.

“Hello?” said my mother’s voice.

“Hi, Mom!”

“*Matthew!*”

For the next thirty seconds or so all I heard was her crying hysterically while speaking in what may as well have been Arabic, because I sure as shit didn’t understand a word she was saying.

“Why are you laughing?” I finally made out through her sobs.

“Because I’m happy,” I answered, smiling.

Shortly after that, we were in an armored Suburban on our way to Adana.

The next day, after a night in the Hilton, a nice bath, and a great sleep on a fluffy white bed, I hit up a mall with the diplomat and his assistant so I could get some new gear, a toothbrush, shaving supplies, and more cigarettes. Then we headed to the consulate where they took a picture for my temporary passport and got the documentation started for my trip home. Once we’d finished with everything they needed me present for, the consulate arranged to have me dropped back at the hotel along with another diplomat who was on his way home. I was making my way out of the building, past the photographs of Obama, Biden, and Kerry, just as about ten marines were filing in. Every one of them was built like a brick shithouse, all of them wearing confident smiles and laughing at whatever they’d been talking about before they walked in the door. As each one laid eyes on me the smile was wiped clean from his face. With one moment of eye contact, they knew that I had just returned from a war zone. Not one of them said a word, but every one of them nodded to me respectfully as he passed.

My hotel was on the Seyhan River, and from the breakfast patio there was an extraordinary view of a mosque. Not just any mosque—the Sabanci Central Mosque: the biggest in all of Turkey. Its six famous minarets towered above the massive dome, like tombstones honoring the prominent men who’d once rested there when the land was an Armenian cemetery.

It was one of the most stunning buildings I had ever seen; it gave you the same kind of feeling I imagine you’d have seeing the Taj Mahal. As soon as my eyes and heart absorbed its beauty I knew what I was doing that night: I was making good on my word to God.

While I was in captivity, almost every time I got down on my knees and prayed, I’d made a promise to the man upstairs.

“God, please forgive me for pretending to be a Muslim and know that I do believe in you and have the utmost respect for Islam, and I promise that if I get out of here, on my first night of freedom the first thing I will do is go to the closest mosque so I can pray as a Muslim one last time.”

Being that I couldn't get there on my first free night, I made sure to follow through on the promise my second. I walked up to the Sabanci Central Mosque just as *Isha*, the last prayer of the day, was ending. I'd figured it would be a bad idea to arrive at the beginning since I didn't know all the prayers—my not keeping up would definitely attract attention, which was the last thing I wanted. Thousands of people flowed out of the sacred temple and collected their shoes, many gracing me with warm, welcoming smiles—some apologetic, as if they were a little disappointed that I'd missed out on the prayer. When they had all gone I removed my knockoff Nikes, set them on a shelf, and entered.

The inside of the mosque was as stunning as the outside, with rich red carpet and transfixing domes that seemed to spiral up endlessly, out beyond the Earth's atmosphere and on past the stars. There couldn't have been more than five people in the entire place by this point, and it felt like I was standing alone in some vast coliseum, or a cathedral designed by Michelangelo. I closed my eyes and raised my palms.

“*Bismillah al rahman al rahim*,” I said, beginning the *Fatiha*.

I prayed with all my heart, remembering all those I had to be grateful to, all that I had to be grateful for, and all those who were left behind. I prayed knowing that without God's help I would not be where I was at that moment, or at any other moment moving forward, for the rest of my life. I prayed for a long while, and it left a profound impression on me; as I laced up my kicks outside the mosque, I felt different. I had fulfilled my promise to God, and I knew that as long as I continued to do so, he would continue to look over me, as he had so faithfully over the past seven months.

Once I had exited the gates and was officially off sacred ground I turned back to admire the mosque's beauty one last time, glowing in the peace of the night. Then I placed a cigarette in my mouth, lit it up, and took a drag. I exhaled and turned from the sight of the dome.

“All right, now you're a Jew again,” I said.

Early the next morning I was on a plane to Istanbul, where I was set down one last time before being lifted up again, climbing through the clouds to fly straight home to New York, where my family was waiting for me.

EPILOGUE

I know it's hard to believe, but once my feet touched down on that lovely New York City soil, it didn't take me long to get back in the game at all. I was at the gym within three days and dating within a week. And being that I'd instructed my mother not to alert the press—and the FBI only does so when they can take credit for the victory—there was no media whirlwind waiting for me when I stepped off the plane.

In other ways, however, reentry was harder. I quickly discovered that “Special” Agent Dilda Brody who'd been assigned to my case—and said she was the FBI's Syria specialist, even though she had never been there, barely spoke a word of Arabic, and knew jack shit about Islam—wasn't very special at all. In fact, not only had she done next to nothing to bring me home or keep me safe, she'd also failed to lift a finger to protect my finances after the Canadian jihadis—Redbeard, Chubs, and co.—took down my banking and credit information. Apparently, the fact that the terrorists had paid off my Discover Card convinced her that I had joined al-Qaeda, and I was judged guilty until proven innocent here in America just as I had been in Syria. Al-Nusra burned through my entire personal savings with online purchases (including one of a Kama Sutra guide, so yes, while I was being kept in the dark, starved, and tormented on a daily basis, some ugly bearded fuck was learning how to eat out his wife's pussy on my dime). They also helped themselves to a nice chunk of my business assets, which Brody claimed—falsely, it turned out, according to Citibank—she'd eventually frozen. As a result, I had a little less than eight grand left to my name, which was a major blow when it came to reestablishing a life for myself in a town as expensive as New York. Thanks to all this she really could not have made coming home any harder if I were Jon fucking Voight.

As if this weren't enough, I also discovered that for the entire duration of my captivity, Brody was doing her all, mostly via email, to convince my mother that

I was perfectly okay, and probably just too busy traveling back and forth between Turkey and Syria to contact anyone. Of course, my mother trusted this woman and didn't want to believe the truth might be much worse, and between that and the fact that she'd been estranged from my father for years, she never called him to let him know that I'd gone missing in Syria . . . and neither did the FBI. When I finally agreed to some interviews, this became a problem.

“Matthew! You have to call your father!” my mother screeched into my ear over the phone. “He can't find out about this from the *New York Times* and CNN!”

I hadn't spoken to him for a long time myself, and I wasn't exactly eager to break the silence with a call like this, but as I'd given an interview to the biggest newspaper in the world and had *60 Minutes* on the horizon, I decided there was no avoiding it. Besides, I'd had enough people screaming at me over my seven months in Syria; the last thing I needed was more of the same from my Brooklyn-born Jewish mother. I dialed my father as soon as I got off the phone with her, and was massively relieved to get his voice mail. I almost hung up, but then I realized this was probably the easiest way to get this part of the ordeal over with.

“Hey, Dad,” I said after the beep. “This is your son. I just wanted to give you a heads-up that about eight months ago I went to Syria to photograph the war, got kidnapped by al-Qaeda, did seven months in six of the worst prisons in the world until I managed to escape, and now I'm gonna be on the front page of the *New York Times* and on CNN. Hope all's well with you! Byyyyye!”

After I hung up I went to the gym, intentionally leaving my phone behind. He told me he almost had a heart attack when he heard the message.

My remorse about leaving Theo behind lasted about twelve hours after I'd crossed into Turkey, which was as long as it took me to find out about his *Undercover Muslim* exploits and realize just how much danger he'd knowingly placed me in by letting me convert, all without so much as a warning. The discovery came when I got to my hotel and went down to the business center to use the computers, hoping to track down Theo's mother so I could at least let her know that he was alive. When I read about the premise of the book I could not believe it. Here was an individual whose treachery was so vast that it had followed me across the border to freedom. I'd always known the clock was ticking on al-Nusra figuring out that I was Jewish, but now I realized the danger

had been ten times greater because it was also ticking on them figuring out Theo's real name, the name on the cover of *Undercover Muslim*. This realization took me from feeling nothing but regret to thinking, basically, life goes on. I did everything I could to help him; I risked my life by staying and trying to pull him out for longer than most would have, despite his months of repeated betrayal. I did my best for him, and that was all I was really capable of doing, but he didn't do his best for himself, or even try. I had nothing to feel guilty about. However, this didn't mean that I wouldn't continue doing everything I could to keep my promise and get help for Theo. In my mind, this was not an obligation I had to him but to my country: to act according to the values that my motherland had instilled in me, so that I could come home knowing I'd represented her with honor and could be proud of who I am.

I may have felt betrayed by the FBI's handling of my case, but I was still doing all I could to help with the investigation. When I sat down with Brody and a sketch artist, they had me describe all the top jihadis I'd met—along with the Canadians. This last part threw me off, because I'd told her they were always wearing masks, but I did my dutiful best, and a month after this session Brody called with news: the FBI had two of the Canadians in custody. When I asked when they'd been arrested, she said they'd had them for "months." In other words, they were already in custody when I described them to the sketch artist—the FBI knew who they were even before I came home, because while I was in captivity, they'd been monitoring my accounts as every cent was stolen from them, including tracking the two items that one of them mailed to himself in Quebec under his real name. That terrorist has since moved back to Canada where he lives a free man, having never been arrested or punished in any way for his role in the crimes committed against me.

Brody said that in order to move forward with charges against the Canadians I'd have to identify them, which I was extremely excited to do. Then she told me *how* I'd have to ID them: she would lay out some photographs of them wearing masks and play me a recording of their voices, as if it were the 1930s and she couldn't just arrange a lineup or record a video of them on any cell phone. When I told her I wasn't sure that I could ID people who'd been wearing masks from photographs and voice recordings and would need to see them to size them up, she tried to put my mind at ease by assuring me it was them, but at this point I trusted her about as much as I would a hungry lion. I didn't want to risk identifying the wrong person—which would totally discredit me as a witness—

or failing to identify the right one and giving his defense lawyers ammunition. I told her I wouldn't do it—if she wanted me to make the Canadians it would have to be with me on one side of the glass and them on the other, to avoid any mistakes.

Brody was livid, and her response has ranged from having two agents show up on my doorstep on the anniversary of my abduction—threatening to arrest me for interfering in a federal investigation if I spoke to the press—to having my speaking engagements canceled. At the threat of arrest, I actually laughed in the agents' faces.

“I can do your time standing on my fuckin' head,” I said, holding out my wrists. “Where you gonna put me—in a federal prison? Go ahead, I've always wanted to learn how to play tennis.”

Over four years have passed, and not one of the Canadians in custody has been put before me for identification, much less indicted or extradited to Canada.

God bless the Patriot Act.

I spent the first month I was back in a hotel in Midtown Manhattan. Being that I hadn't paid my bills in over seven months and the FBI refused to give me a new social security number or any help straightening out my credit, finding an apartment was a challenge. The social worker from the FBI's Victim Assistance Program did suggest that I look into homeless shelters, because she'd heard they were “not that bad.” That was pretty much the extent of their “assistance” when it came to this victim.

After I was turned down by what felt like every landlord in the city, one finally looked at my near-perfect credit score from before the kidnapping and decided to rent me a modest one-bedroom on the Upper East Side. I moved in on September first, exactly one month after landing at JFK, and having my own place again could not have been a greater feeling. On my first night in my new home I sat on an air mattress looking up some of the soldiers I'd been locked up with on Facebook. I stared at a photo of Shareef on his page—I could tell from the date and his unwounded hand that it had been taken just before he was captured, and his huge smile brought tears to my eyes. I looked to see if he had any family listed and found three relatives; all had blocked the ability to message them except one, his cousin Heba. I figured reaching out to her was the right thing to do, and I wrote her a message letting her know that Shareef was alive

and being treated as well as one could hope for under the circumstances. Within a few days I received the most beautiful response, full of gratitude, and in no time Heba and I were friends.

Knowing that Brody was probably monitoring my every move, I told her about my communication with Heba right away. She'd already jumped to the conclusion that I'd joined al-Qaeda before; I didn't want her getting the idea that I was working with Bashar's regime. I also told her that I thought this was our best chance of getting information that might lead to Theo, being that I knew al-Nusra was openly negotiating for Shareef and the rest of the men. She blew me off.

Needless to say, after all I had seen and endured in the months leading up to my homecoming, it wasn't easy to surprise me. But when I received a message from Heba just twenty-five days after we'd first connected, telling me that Shareef and Ali had been exchanged for six high-level al-Nusra figures, to say I was surprised would be an understatement. I couldn't believe it—I'd been so afraid I would never see any of my friends again, and this news brought not only relief that at least some had survived, but hope that others would as well. Naturally, once he was home it didn't take me and Shareef long to get on a Skype call together, and we beamed at each other like brothers who were just as grateful to God for the other's survival as we were for our own.

"Theo?" Shareef asked almost immediately.

"He didn't make it out," I told him.

"Kawa, Skype. Theo, mother," Shareef said then.

I smiled.

"Give it to me."

And just like that, I had Kawa's Skype name—and Kawa, I now learned, was in charge of all negotiations on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra for any and all prisoners in his custody.

After this was out of the way we moved on to other topics, like how they had heard from Obeida that the Moroccan had been judged a "bad man" and executed. Neither of us exhibited an ounce of emotion at the loss, and moments later Shareef was suddenly wearing the all-knowing smile of a man who already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask.

"So, Jumu'ah," he said, "you still Muslim?"

“Yeah, about that . . .” I smiled and scratched the top of my head as I looked down and then back up at him, searching for the right words. “There’s something I kind of have to tell you . . . I’m Jewish.”

A second after he absorbed this information, Shareef’s jaw hit the floor, and then he broke into the biggest, loudest laugh I had ever heard. I cracked up, too, but when we were done laughing at the fact that I had tricked al-Qaeda into thinking that a unicorn was a donkey for seven months, Shareef grew serious and assured me he didn’t care that I was Jewish, that he had nothing against my people, and that he still loved me and would be my brother forever.

After our call ended I sent Brody an email, containing Kawa’s Skype name preceded by one short sentence:

From: Matthew Schrier <matthew.schrier[REDACTED]>
Date: October 8, 2013 at 1:44:52 PM EDT
To: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED].fbi.gov>
Subject: Re: Contact Info

This will have to go to Theo's mom.

Kawa's Skype name: **Kawa** [REDACTED]

Sent from my iPhone

The following day I sent her another message, this one outlining what I knew, specifically the fact that Kawa had expressed an interest in dealing with Qatar when it came to any negotiations. I told her that this was who the Skype name should be given to in order to secure Theo’s release.

From: Matthew Schrier <matthew.schrier [REDACTED]>
To: [REDACTED]
Sent: Wed Oct 09 14:24:30 2013
Subject: Qatar

I want to talk to you about this when you have a minute. Kawa was always telling us he sent our videos to the American Embassy in Qatar with a ransom, remember? Theo said it was his fantasy and I kind of agree with him even though we both knew it was a lie. If Qatarians could reach out to Kawa with something to offer I think that's our best bet of getting him home. I mean lets be real, anything paid for Theo is not going to be enough to wage war against Israel. You or the family can't call obviously because he'll get spooked and never use that Skype name again. Qatar-They're our ally aren't they? This could work.

Sent from my iPhone

Sorry—unable to talk right now, she replied.

Ten months later, James Foley was brutally executed by ISIS for all the world to see. Five days after that, Peter Theo Curtis was released—in a deal negotiated by none other than Qatar. I had kept my promise and gotten help; they just chose to leave him there until it suited them to bring him home.

Ali's response to the news of my Jewish heritage during our first Skype call was much less dramatic than Shareef's. In fact, he didn't look surprised at all—and for very good reason.

“You know, we discussed that you might be Jewish once,” he said with a smile. “Because every time we asked you a question about Christianity, you never knew any of the answers.”

Ali's smile had always had a grounding effect on me when we were inside, and now that we were out it was no different. His and Shareef's survival made life easier for me. I was home, but I no longer had any friends I could relate to—they made me feel less alone, even though they were always seven hours ahead and over seven thousand miles away.

Between Brody's antics, one *Bowfinger*-esque movie producer after another trying to hustle me out of my story, and scumbag journalists doing the same, over time my happiness at being out was soured by anger. It seemed like everyone who contacted me wanted something for nothing. And then, one day, I received an email from the US Army—they wanted to know if I'd speak at their annual Antiterrorism Conference in Orlando. I had only done one speaking

engagement before, for the LAPD, which Brody had canceled as I was flying there and only green-lit again after I promised not to discuss the Canadian connection in front of over four hundred counterterrorism police officers and detectives—my guess is she didn't want these highly trained individuals asking me questions during the Q&A about who was responsible for my bank accounts not being frozen; why none of the addresses any of the goods were shipped to in Turkey or Canada had been raided; or about what was purchased, like *over a dozen* laptops and tablets. It's quite possible some of these detectives would have been able to connect the dots long before I did to see that the FBI was most likely letting them steal my money so that they could then intercept the laptops and tablets before delivering them directly into the hands of al-Qaeda, creating the intelligence community's wet dream for infiltrating the enemy. So in reality, the FBI wasn't conducting an investigation; they were conducting an operation. Brody and her colleagues just used me as chum, to bring the sharks to the surface.

But when it came to the army, I jumped at the opportunity to tell my story to people who weren't trying to use it to make money or make their careers, and I wrote back and said yes. To be honest, though, I expected the gig to be canceled as soon as the organizer contacted the FBI. In fact, I was so confident that this was going to happen that I didn't even bother to rehearse. Little did I know that when it comes to their conferences, the Mother Army asks permission from no man and no woman—as the man who'd contacted me later said, “They need to just stay the fuck out of it.”

When I arrived at the hotel in Orlando and met my contact, he walked me around for a while, introducing me to various high-ranking military and government officials—including several generals. They all said the same thing: “I can't wait to hear you speak tomorrow.” Apparently I was the main event; once I found out, I ran back to my room and began to rehearse like crazy. The next day I gave a thirty-five-minute speech, mostly about how I'd used humor to build relationships, the intelligence-gathering methods I'd successfully employed, like memorizing the serial number on the window, and the escape. By the time I wrapped it up, all 225 people in the ballroom were on their feet giving me a standing ovation. I was later told that no one in the conference's fourteen-year history had ever received such a reception.

After I got offstage, people kept coming up to me to shake my hand. They all asked if I had ever served, and when I said I hadn't they were shocked—most of the tactics I'd employed were taught in some of the military's most physically

and mentally challenging programs. Being among these men and women who understood me, and being so appreciated by them, was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life; it was what I'd hoped to receive from the FBI, but never did. In Syria I'd fought to show our enemies exactly what Americans are made of, and all I got from my government in return for my patriotism were lies and betrayal. Now I was being accepted into a community of people who could understand what I'd gone through and what I'd risked, who knew what it was like to wage war from a battlefield instead of an air-conditioned cubicle. I finally had friends here like I'd had over there, the kind I knew I would have been able to count on if they'd been with me in those cells. As for Theo, they were all in agreement that I'd done the right thing in leaving him behind (well, to tell the truth, a lot of them said I should have killed him).

Since then I have spoken to military audiences all over the country, using my experience to give perspective and insight into what it's like to be held in an Islamic prison—in case, God forbid, any of our soldiers or pilots ever end up in a situation like mine. It's a service that I'm proud to perform, and to not only support our troops but to have them support me is an honor and a privilege for which I will die a grateful man.

At the end of my speech there's always a Q&A session. I usually get a lot of the same questions, and one that I hear almost every time is whether I have nightmares. My answer is always the same. "No," I tell them. "I have dreams."

Most of my correspondence with Shareef these days is via emojis, thanks to his poor English and my poorer Arabic, but as the weeks turned into months and the months into years, my friendships with him and with Ali have endured. I'm not certain how long it was after we came home, but during one of my early conversations with Ali, he told me that days before he and Shareef were exchanged they were allowed to make Skype calls with their families. When Shareef was on his call he learned the most unexpected thing: that an American photographer who had escaped from Jabhat al-Nusra had made it home, and this photographer had contacted his cousin on Facebook to let the family know that he was alive. After the call, Shareef stepped back inside the cell and two words rang joyfully from his lips.

"Jumu'ah escaped!" he yelled to the room. "Jumu'ah escaped!"

His words spread like wildfire and within seconds every soldier was on his feet shouting "Jumu'ah escaped!" and celebrating my victory as if it were his own. The Wolfman, not believing his eyes at the sight of his prisoners, these

Arabs before him rejoicing over the escape of an American, was overcome with rage.

“What are you doing?” he screamed. “Stop cheering for the American! Do you hear me? Stop cheering for the American!”

But it was too late. The cuckoo had already flown over the nest. Ali told me that after they received the news he saw Ayman sitting against the wall alone, wearing a smile born from a brother’s love; Ayman, who, along with the rest of the soldiers, I think of every day with a full heart—one that always hurts, knowing I may never see them again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Schrier is from Deer Park, New York, and a graduate of Hofstra University, where he studied film production and English. In 2012, while outside Aleppo on his way home from photographing the war, Schrier was captured by the al-Nusra Front, a group better known in the West as al-Qaeda in Syria. Seven months later, he became the first Westerner to ever escape from them. His story has been covered by *60 Minutes*, the *New York Times*, and CNN, and since his return home, Matthew has devoted himself to working with the US military, using his experience in Syria to educate American troops about survival after capture by extremists. *The Dawn Prayer* is his first book.