

## One

With my legs bunched up near my chin, I buried my face into my knees and rocked. I smelled the rusty, iron scent of blood on my jeans. Strands of long hair that had been pulled out of my braid after the struggle were sticking to my neck and cheeks, held in place by sweat and blood. I reached up and felt the sore skin around my neck, where my hood had been tied. Welts had formed around my wrists, where the ropes had been. I moaned.

*Who are my kidnappers? Could it be Hezbollah? The Syrian Army? Or the South Lebanese Army? God, please let it not be Hezbollah.*

My heart beat in my neck at the thought of being held by a terrorist group. I squeezed my knees even tighter and whimpered from a sudden, sharp pain in my ribs.

I remembered the Sunday I broke the news to my parents that I was going to study in Damascus. Mother made me promise that I would not go to Lebanon, even saying that it's because she feared Hezbollah.

"Elizabeth, I want to hear you promise." She had insisted when I shrugged my shoulders and grinned.

I thought she was being over-protective, after all Hezbollah had ceased taking hostages three years ago and released their last captive, Terry Anderson, last year.

*It can't be them.*

My heart rate reduced to a dull thud. So, perhaps it's the Syrian Army? Adrien had told me during my last visit to see him at the embassy that the Syrian government knew I was a former British diplomat, and even though the Syrian Army was in Lebanon, he vouched that I would be safer there than in Damascus. I trusted Adrien implicitly, as I had done so with the MI6 officer in my former embassy in Sana'a.

I prayed the Syrians had picked me up, or even the South Lebanese Army. After all, I told myself, they are on the same side. I whispered to myself Adrien's reassurance that I still had diplomatic immunity, and that this meant I would be released soon and sent to the British Embassy.

I lifted my head up and looked around the room. It was dimly lit, with one bare bulb and a fan in the centre of the ceiling. A grimy, thin mattress lay on the filthy floor, with an empty nightstand beside it. The one window the room had was crudely boarded up. I could see daylight, which seeped in from around the ill-fitting plywood. Gingerly, I stood up gripping my left side as pain seared in my ribcage and took three steps forward. Through a crack in the board, I could make out a gravel road and the bonnet of a black car. My field of vision was disappointingly limited, as I peered in all directions for any clues as to where I was. I pulled at the wood to see if it was loose, but it had been nailed to the window frame and then I discovered one, additional barrier. Like so many homes I had seen in this part of the world, windows on the first floor were barred, perhaps to keep inhabitants in rather than prevent break-ins. My hope of a possible escape route was dashed. I collapsed onto the mattress in a heap and wept.

I thought of my parents. I couldn't take my mind off the intense longing I had to see them again and put my arms around them. I had felt loneliness before, but this was different. It was an aloneness that you are somewhere in the world where your loved ones don't know, nor have any hope of finding you or even dream what is happening to you. It was an emptiness of unfathomable depth.

I reached up to the empty nightstand and pulled open its small drawer. I was surprised to find that it was full of rubbish, which I sifted through. A rush of relief washed over me, when I saw a pen and a possible scrap of paper to write on.

Then slowly, I began to write.