

Olivia attempts to regain her American children's freedom from oppression.

## **Forbidden Prayers**

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## *Chapter One – The Demonstration*

“Amriki,” an old woman’s voiced shrieked.

As our luxury sedan came to halt in the dark Sahara desert amidst a crowd of angry people, terror surged my veins. Some men carried torches while others carried signs with anti-American slogans. The shrieks and chants of women and children mixed with the men’s curses against the United States made my head pound.

"Please God, not another demonstration," I prayed silently, but it became apparent that I had never encountered a demonstration like this. Before I had always been able to fade back and disappear. This time I had nowhere to hide. The protests I had experienced previously paled to the event I now witnessed. My heart was racing with fear, and breathing was difficult.

I looked out the window of the sedan, captivated by an ancient Bedouin woman in a ragged, dirty black abaya. Her eyes reflected anger beneath her tattered long black scarf. She carried a sign covered in scrawling Arabic, denouncing the sanctions of the United States against Libya. The disheveled woman screamed curses and lit the corner of an American flag. My heart burned as though consumed by the flames destroying the symbol of my freedom.

The crowd, fanned by the burning flag, increased their frenzied chanting. The crowd surged closer to the car, their hate-filled mantra seeming to rock the car of its own accord. The Bedouin woman waved the burning flag. As reflections of red, white and blue perished into ashes, the flicker of flames reflected off the chrome inside the car and bounced off the tears that formed in my eyes. I squelched the urge to roll down the window and defend my country. It would be suicide to reveal my identity to this fanatical crowd.

"Curse your Amriki," my husband, Ali, muttered. As he stared at me from the front seat, his eyes filled with detest. He ran his well manicured hands through his curly, black hair.

The demonstration took a nasty twist as men brandished machine guns. I covered my nose and mouth with my silk scarf as my stomach convulsed with apprehension.

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"Madame," Nassar, my guard, whispered, "please back away from the window."

"Okay," I replied in Arabic. Nassar had been quiet for the last several hours, even my husband's outbursts had yielded no response from my sentinel. I looked at Nassar out of the corner of my eye, noticing his face was filled with apprehension. His dark brown eyes scanned the increasing violence, the border, and the final checkpoint from Libya into Egypt. His hand rested on the 9mm gun under his Armani jacket. I had watched the violence outside with apprehension, but my guard's stealth-like motions made me more anxious.

"Amriki, Amriki." The blood-curling screams reverberated around the car.

"This is your fault." My husband mumbled something to the driver in Arabic, and they both snorted and chuckled. I knew it was about me, but I no longer cared. I had grown accustomed to being insulted and tormented.

"Leave her alone." Nassar stared straight at Ali.

"She is my wife, not yours," Ali replied, his lip curling in disdain. Nassar remained silent and continued to scan the horizon. Ali began to twitch back and forth against the seat wrinkling his expensive clothes. "She is always the cause of my problems, she..."

"Uskut," Nassar's voice was very low and stern. "Shut up."

I sat silently and watched as the men and women surrounding the car become more violent. My heart was filled with emotion; my mind was dazed and confused. The danger of the situation was real, but there was no turning back. I had promised myself that if I ever got the chance to leave Libya again I would never return, even if it meant dying in the attempt. Libya was not my home; Allah was not my God.

Blood throbbed in my temples, and it became even harder to breathe. As the car inched through the crowd, I was not sure whether the emotions I was feeling were hopeful anticipation that my year long entrapment in Libya was finally over, fear of the demonstrators, or dread of being caught and punished. I strove to keep my emotions under control for the sake of my children, 8-year-old Alexis, 7-year-old Anthony and 3-year-old Kali. They had been hidden under a blanket in the back of the sedan since we started this trip.

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"Bismillah...Allah help us," my guard whispered and pointed out my window careful not to touch me, indicating a crude mannequin representing an American being strung up and beaten. For the first time I found myself glad there were no streetlights in this godforsaken land, as the darkness hid my tears and fear.

"Dear God," I softly uttered. Men doused fuel on the mannequin and it ignited into flames. The iridescent fire and grey smoke contrasted eerily with the black desert background.

"Momma," a small voice moaned from the back of the sedan as machine gun fire filled the air.

I quickly turned to check on my children, "Don't be afraid; please be brave," I whispered, hoping that I sounded more confident than I felt.

"Halaas...leave those children alone." Ali turned and grabbed my arm.

"Leave her."

"She is my wife." Ali turned to challenge Nassar and pointed at me. "She does what I say."

"Halaas," Nassar waved his hand at Ali. "Shut up."

"She is responsible for this." Ali pointed outside the window towards the mannequin.

Nassar animatedly gestured with both hands. "They," he said pointing to the crowd, "are protesting against Amriki, her country. How can she be responsible?"

Ali cleared his throat. "Maybe they are protesting against her; after all she is a foreigner, an Americana..."

What did you say?" Nassar was becoming noticeably upset.

Ali laughed cruelly. "What?"

"Do they know that she is inside this car?"

Instead of answering, Ali lit another cigarette and avoided eye contact with Nassar.

"Ali, answer me. Do they know?" Nassar discreetly slid his 9mm out.

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Ali pretended to be preoccupied with his lighter. "La, la," he said and flicked his gold lighter on and off. "They do not know that she is inside the car but..."

Nassar's dark eyes pierced the darkness. "Ali, if they know that she is an Americana, she will be killed."

"So?" Ali said maliciously.

"Your precious life will be in danger as well," Nassar snarled, "or did you forget?"

The reality hit Ali. "Curse you woman. Just give her to the crowd. That is what they want." Ali's voice petered out as he saw the look on Nassar's face.

Nassar stared directly into Ali's eyes; danger flashed from within my guard's eyes. I watched as Nassar's body tensed every muscle; I could hear my guard control his breathing. I buried my face into my blue, silk scarf; I had never seen my guard act like this before.

"Give her to them," Ali said with a casual wave of his hand. "Just hand her over and then we will be free...she is cursed anyways."

"La, no."

"She is my wife," Ali flicked his lighter in Nassar's face. "I can do whatever I want with her."

"I can't ... I won't go back to Libya." I said, choking on my words.

"You can and will go back to Libya," Ali spat as he spoke.

"No, I won't," I shook my head, "la..."

"What?" Ali glared at me. "Do you think your God can save you now...you are in my country...you do as I say." "Even Allah would not save you..."

"I will not go back to the villa, I will never..."

"You will do what I say, Allah will..."

Nassar moved to the edge of his seat and brought his face within an inch of Ali's eyes. "Halaas...leave Madame alone or else I will speak with your father." His strong jaw clenched back and forth as he spoke; his shoulders were pumped and ready to fight

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"My father doesn't pay you enough to die for her. But how much is she worth to you, my friend?" Ali's voice dripped sarcasm. "At one time she was very beautiful, maybe she has bewitched you my friend?"

"Uskut," Nassar demanded. "Shut up," he added in English

"No one can save you, no one," Ali ignored Nassar and pointed at me, "your beauty, your God, your guard, no one can save you," Ali's face was contorted. "You are cursed...all that beauty and you are going to die." Ali took a long drag on his cigarette when he exhaled his lips curled as he spoke. "So tell me woman where is your God...your prophet now?" Ali spat as he spoke prophet; he was referring to Jesus. Muslims considered Jesus only a prophet whereas I considered him to be God's son. I knew better than to reply, I was forbidden to speak the name of Jesus.

"Halaas," Nassar snapped again. "So help me Ali, if you don't shut your mouth..."

"Okay, okay." Ali pretended compliance with Nassar. "My friend, you are worth everything my father pays you and more." Ali smiled at Nassar; his smile reminded me of a jackal defending his dinner.

"Halaas, enough," Nassar dismissed Ali and waved the back of his hand in the air.

"How dare you talk to me like that?" Ali snarled.

The discussion between Ali and Nassar was becoming heated again and I tried to tune them out. I noticed that the intensity of the demonstration seemed to be diminishing slightly. Some of the crowds were being allowed to pass through the border and appeared to be calming down.

Nervously, I watched the curious men and children try and look into the sedan. I fought back tears of frustration and fear as I self-consciously and nervously inspected the scarf that covered my hair. I took the ends of my scarf and covered my nose and face again. I prayed that the scarf and Libyan garment would mask my true heritage. I knew the consequences if I was caught, but I couldn't allow myself to contemplate the danger of the situation. The one thing I knew for sure, it was either deliverance or death. Either way, it was in my God's hands to decide the outcome.

A shriek and sudden gun fire startled me, I looked out the window and watched as men and women screamed more curses again my country.

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"Make sure she's covered. Make sure that not one strand of hair is showing...or else." Ali glared.

Nassar glanced over at me. "She's covered, now leave her alone," Nassar thumped the leather of the front seat with his fingers.

"Alleluia," Ali raised his hands. "Alhamdulillah, thank you Allah, for once she is listening."

"Go," Nassar hesitantly instructed the driver to proceed.

"Allah, help us," the driver chanted some of the Koran.

"You are the cause of all of my problems," Ali lit another cigarette. "It will be your fault if I get into trouble again."

"Go now," Nassar demanded. The driver nervously put the car into drive and proceeded slowly through and around the car. The driver and Ali smoke fervently. The smoke had been thickening inside the sedan, and now the air had become unbearable as the pile of cigarettes on the floor grew. The children started to cough underneath the blanket.

"The smoke," I whispered.

"The bambinos need air." Nassar commanded the driver to roll his window down.

"No, they will see her face and she will get us killed." Ali jerked his head back and forth against the seat. "Cover your face."

Nassar informed Ali that I had already covered my nose and mouth. He spoke harshly to both Ali and the driver in rapid Arabic. The driver reluctantly rolled down his window a few inches.

I closed my eyes and rested my head against the door. I knew the angry faces pressed against the tinted glass would be burned into my memory and haunt my dreams forever. I prayed with my heart that the children would fall asleep, and when they awoke, we would safely be in Egypt, and this whole ordeal would just be a bad dream to them.

"Look." Nassar pointed out his window. Another demonstration appeared to be getting underway. I closed my eyes and waited. The longer we refused to respond, the more violent and determined the demonstrators become. Again, the infuriated demonstrators hit the car with rocks and wooden stakes and motioned persistently for us to join them.

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Ali was becoming more restless as each minute passed, afraid the crowd would discover he had an American passenger. Ali and Nassar worriedly exchanged muffled words. The discussion was diverted when the driver pointed toward an opening in the crowd. The bitter taste of bile rose in my throat and my stomach began to knot as the checkpoint towers inched nearer. I knew this particular checkpoint would be the toughest because thousands of foreigners and Bedouins traveled this route daily. The border stood only one hundred yards away, but felt like miles. My heart fluttered, and I knew that once I entered Egypt there were still no guarantees of safety, but at least it would be safer than Libya.

Ali made a sudden move and leaned my way. I flinched and shifted backwards in the seat. I watched in slow motion as Ali reached for the door handle. I sat frozen as though caught between time and space. "Americana, Americana." Ali taunted and touched the door handle. I watched as Ali's face began to take on a demonic form. Now I knew the saying "the eyes are the windows to the soul" was true. I had just gotten a glimpse into hell itself. "Olivia, Allah has cursed you." Ali's eyes flashed with rage and hatred.

"Stop it, Ali." Nassar pushed Ali backward into his seat. "Yalla"

"What?" Ali acted insulted, "I'm just making sure her door is locked."

"Leave me alone, for once Ali just leave me alone." I tried to keep from crying but tears formed in my eyes.

"Where is your God now Olivia, where is he now?" Ali's nostril continually flared when he spoke. "Why doesn't your prophet Jesus save you?" Ali grinned maliciously.

"Uskut," I said and then called Ali a bad name in Arabic. I instantly flinched backward awaiting his slap.

"How dare you talk to me like that, who do you think you are?"

"Momma," a small voice whimpered.

"Nassar," another voice softly cried.

As Nassar turned to check on the children, Ali lunged from the front seat and tried to back hand me; Nassar caught and squeezed his hand with massive fingers. "Stop it." Nassar glared at Ali and Ali turned around.

"I'll deal with you later," he uttered.

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The driver got Nassar's attention and pointed toward the border gate. A shudder ran down my spine. I could actually see the checkpoint. I had been not paying attention as the car inched closer to the border. I knew if we did not cross over to Egypt soon, our fate would be sealed. The children and I would be forced to live in Libya for the rest of our lives. I did not possess the strength to try and escape again, and I knew Ali would abort whatever plans I made to leave Libya.

"How do we cross?" the driver asked Nassar.

Nassar shook his head and pointed toward several revolutionary guards walking toward us. Ali spoke to Nassar in rapid Arabic. I couldn't understand everything, but I knew he was trying to convince Nassar to turn around and head back to Benghazi. I watched the exchange covertly, relief pouring through my body as my guard shook his head no. Ali swore belligerently in Arabic, first at me and then at the U.S.

"Uskut," Nassar snapped.

Ali looked over his shoulder at me. He fixed his eyes onto mine with a hypnotic captivation and said, "Because of you, your precious children will be in danger. They will stay in danger if you do not..." I could not look away from Ali. My mind was spinning in all different directions. Ali's black eyes penetrated mine, trying to coerce me. I forced myself to close my eyes. I lowered my head and tried to breathe.

"Turn around and leave her alone; we have bigger problems," Nassar demanded. About six heavily armed revolutionary guards had nearly reached our car. Nassar spoke in rapid Egyptian to the driver.

I lifted my head slightly. I sat rigidly and held the scarf tightly over my face. I watched in fear as the revolutionary guards' motioned for more guards to assist them. The checkpoint was about 100 feet away from us; I could even see the yellow painted lines. What irony it would be to get this close to only have freedom snatched away at the last minute.

One of the guards tapped his bayonet on the car window. Reluctantly the driver rolled his window down all of the way. I shivered, not from the cool desert air, but from sheer fright.

"Marhaba," the guard greeted the driver.

"Passport," another guard demanded.

"La," Nassar shook his head to indicate no.

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"Passport," the guard demanded more forcefully.

I buried my head into my scarf. I could hear Nassar producing several travel documents. One of the guards rapped on my window, and in Arabic he asked me to lift my head. I was terrified, but kept my face covered and head bowed.

"Up, woman," the guard repeated angrily, "your face."

"La," I shook my head. "No," I whispered.

I could hear the guard yelling for more men. Nervously I twirled my scarf's edges. I could feel the tension thickening inside the smoke-filled car and outside in the black Sahara desert air.

"Dear Jesus, help me." I prayed silently. I loved my children more than life; I didn't want them to be harmed. "What do I do?"

"Up," the guard yelled in Arabic.

I slipped my trembling hand from underneath my scarf and grabbed for the door handle. I tried to convince myself that if I surrendered then the children would be physically safe and that my life would be a small price to pay for their safety.

"La, Madame," Nassar whispered, "the bambinos."

Nassar leaned over to remove my hand, but stopped. He knew he couldn't touch me in any way regardless of the circumstances. "Madame," his eyes pleaded.

I lowered my eyes and grabbed the cold metal, my fingers clutched the handle. Fear coursed through my veins.

Ali turned and stared at me with malevolence. I could feel the hatred radiating from him in waves. Ali took his index finger and ran it across his throat, "Your children will die," he mouthed the words to me.

"Momma," a small voice whispered from the back.

"Madame," my guard's voice was low and filled with compassion.

Tears started to run down my cheeks. "Dear Jesus," I prayed silently, "I thought I would have more time," my chest started to heave. "I am sorry I have let you down and my children down. I wanted to teach them more about you and your mercy..."

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"Up," the guard pointed his machine gun directly at my forehead through the glass. His finger was on the trigger.

I did not want the children to suffer anymore than they already had. I knew what I had to do. "I love you," I whispered to my children. As I began to push on the handle; my heart felt as if someone had shoved a dagger through it.

"Madame," Nassar's raspy voice startled me, "please Madame, don't."

I lifted my head slightly, tears clouded my vision. I avoided eye contact with Ali and looked at my guard's beseeching face. My hand still clutched the cold metal handle. My thoughts were racing; everything in my world was happening so fast, yet at this moment time seemed to stand still.

We had hurriedly left the villa this morning after the cars were deemed ready to travel. I had hastily prepared the children and grabbed some of our belongings. Now, ten hours later, I was on the border of Egypt and Libya in the middle of an Anti-American Demonstration. My children's lives were in danger. The only thing I could think of was to surrender myself to save them; my life held little meaning compared to theirs. I only hoped that they would hold close to their heart all of the stories and songs I had taught them about Jesus and never forget Him. I started to tear but forced myself to be strong.

I wiped away a lone tear. Now was not the time to cry; I had to be brave for the sakes of my children. I didn't want their last memory of their mother to be of me crying and pleading for my life.

"Curse you," Ali swore at me in Arabic. His eyes were wild with detest. He seemed to morph from a man into a trapped animal. Several times I had to open and close my eyes to assure myself that I was actually looking at my husband. His face was crimson; his neck bulged with protruding veins. His usual dark eyes were aglow. I shuddered; the hairs on the back of my neck and arm stood straight up. I tried to look away but couldn't.

"Up!" The revolutionary guard angrily demanded again that I look at him, and his voice broke the stupor that Ali held over me.

"Madame," I felt a slight tug on my garment. Nassar had broken the strict Islamic rules about touching a woman. I could feel his fingertips holding onto my elbow. "Look," he whispered.

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I didn't want to look at him. I knew that his face could possibly deter me from doing what I knew needed to be done. I could hear Ali swearing and could feel the hatred from his stare.

Nassar gently squeezed my elbow again, "Please," he said in Arabic.

I lowered my eyes and looked over at my guard. I was still determined to do what must be done. I could not allow his eyes to convince me otherwise. He moved his left hand slightly; I looked at the movement and noticed that he held something blue securely in his grasp. I couldn't really see what it was because it was hidden mostly underneath his jacket. He moved his jacket slightly; my eyes opened wide when I saw the gold embossed Eagle. It appeared to be my passport; my breathing became shallow. He moved his hand again and revealed what appeared to be several American passports.

"America," he whispered in English.

All of this happened in several moments but it felt like an eternity. I looked at his hands again. His long fingers held a blue document that resembled my passport. I peered closely and saw the word, "Passport."

"Oh," I inhaled. A closer look revealed the majestic American eagle, and the words, "United States of America." At the sight of the passports I wanted to hug Nassar but I knew the danger if I did. Ali was just looking for a reason to dispose of me. I had to keep myself from smiling so I bit my lower lip and nodded my head.

"Madame," he smiled slightly, and then softly whispered in English, "home."

I did not know what to do. Could it really be possible that this time I was going home to my beloved country? I had always known that Ali held our passports even though he denied it. I was never able to find them. I also knew that Ali never got me the appropriate documents to travel and I knew I had never been issued a Libyan passport. I looked at my guard again; his face was solemn but his eyes twinkled. To possess American passports was very dangerous – punishable by imprisonment or death. I was grateful that Nassar held the children's passports and mine. If Ali had them in his possession he would probably have already handed me over to the guards just so he could return to Benghazi without being harmed.

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The demonstration outside the car seemed to be winding up again. One of the guards yelled for further assistance. I could see five or six additional guards surround the sedan; their AK-47's were aimed directly at us. This did not faze me. Numerous times over the last year I'd had machine guns held and cocked against my head. I was numb to such tactics.

I could hear the driver mumbling to the guard outside his window but couldn't understand what was being said. Ali just sat motionless; a look of disgust on his face. I watched as Nassar covertly placed the passports securely in his inside jacket pocket. He withdrew about four hundred dinars, Libyan currency, and proceeded to instruct the driver to hand the money over to the guard at his window.

I could hear the revolutionary guard tapping his machine gun against my window. I took a deep breath and exhaled. Nassar gave me a questioning look. I smiled faintly and withdrew my hand from the door handle. My children deserved to be raised with a mother that would teach them forever about Jesus. I was not going to go down without a fight. I was not going to surrender myself here in the dark desolate Sahara. If they wanted me they would have to physically remove me from the sedan. After all I was raised to be an American and would not disgrace my culture by surrendering without a battle. More importantly, I knew that if my God's will was for me to return home, then who could stand against Him?

I firmly placed my silk scarf over my nose and mouth; thankful that I had brown eyes as most Arabic women do. I ignored Ali's venomous curses and lifted my head and looked into Ali's eyes. "Dear Jesus," I prayed with my heart, "give me courage." Boldness surged through me; I felt as if he was standing there with me. I straightened my shoulders and tilted my chin upwards. I dismissed Ali's glare and turned my head. I inhaled one last time. "Marhaba," I greeted the revolutionary guard in Arabic staring directly into his eyes

## *Chapter Two – Destination Unknown*

“Allah u Akbar, Allah u Akbar,” Allah is great, Allah is great, the muezzin’s harmonious voice echoed throughout the border of Egypt and Libya. This was the last and final call to prayer of the evening. In lieu of the situation, I couldn’t help but wonder if this would be the last time I heard the Islamic call to prayer; either by deliverance or death. There were several spotlights that illuminated parts of the desert, I watched in fascination as numerous Bedouins and guards began to face Mecca and pray. Even in the desolate Sahara men were still brought to prayer by the words of the muezzin. I watched as men dropped their assault rifles and other destructive weapons and obediently knelt to worship Allah. I was not Muslim but took a slight comfort in the consistent prayer in a not-so-consistent and dangerous country. I smiled faintly despite my treacherous situation.

“Hmm.” the guard cleared his throat. His face was solemn; I watched as his forefinger twitched back and forth in a caressing movement over the trigger. “You have papers?”

I gave him a blank look, and my hands trembled slightly as I held the scarf securely over my mouth and nose; the solid 18 karat gold bracelets I wore on my wrists clanked back and forth.

“Do you have Libyan traveling papers?” He asked again in Arabic.

I never broke eye contact with the guard and shook my head. “No I don’t,” I spoke unexpectedly in English.

The guard was noticeably surprised when I answered in English. “Oh no,” I uttered in English again. I looked helplessly at Nassar.

Nassar looked at me for a moment and then stared at the border guard, watching his every move.

“Petrol! Petrol!” Men standing in the towers shouted over the speakers in Arabic. Red and orange flames sparked the air. A whooshing sound penetrated the desert, the fire spread instantaneously. Clouds of grey and bluish black smoke arose quickly.

The sound of machine gun fire filled the desert as people began firing aimlessly into the air. I could hear women and children screaming and running for cover. The guard spoke rapidly in Arabic to several of the guards who were surrounding the sedan. I heard Nassar inhale and exhale

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very softly. Ali fidgeted apprehensively in the front seat, his tailored Armani clothes looked disheveled. The driver sat motionless, his hands glued to the steering wheel. I felt as if I was paralyzed and prayed silently.

“Please Jesus, we’ve come this far...please Father soften the guard’s heart and allow us to leave Libya without our travel documents...and with all three of my children...please God.”

My heart sank as I watched another American flag being consumed by flames. Men, women and children screamed words of destruction to the United States of America. I had seen the destruction of my country’s flag numerous times before, but I never got used to the pain or anger that surged my heart. I tried to control the tears that flooded my eyes, “Oh God, please not now,” I uttered nervously. I accidentally let go of my scarf and tried to push on my eyes to stop the tears. I quickly tried to cover and hide my face, but I realized the guard had already seen me. He stared at me for a moment puzzled by my tears until he turned and saw the American flag being defiled and burned.

The guard cleared his throat again and continued to stare at me. Additional machine gun fire filled the air and the guard turned his attention away from me. “Yalla, yalla,” he yelled to the guards as the demonstration was becoming progressively violent. He deliberately turned his attention back to me, “you Americana?” The guard asked quietly in heavily accented English; his words were more a statement rather than a question.

The violence of the demonstration was escalating; there were people running in the direction of the sedan. I prayed quietly in my heart that the machine gun fire would not strike the sedan or injure one of the children. Nassar must have sensed my fear as he quickly turned and checked on the children. I could hear him speak softly and gently to the children; Nassar cared more for the children and their well being than Ali did.

“You are an Americana...and your children?” The guard watched as Nassar tenderly yet firmly interacted with my children.

“Na’am,” I replied. I turned to motion to the children and realized that all three of their little beautiful faces were not underneath the blanket but looking straight at the guard. “Please, they are just children; they are so tired and hungry, please...” I surprised myself when the words I petitioned were spoken in fluent Arabic.

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The guard raised his hand to silence me. He gave me a queer look; I guess he too was surprised that I had spoken in Arabic. He looked at each one of the children and then at me. He dismissed the guards that hovered over the sedan. The heavily armed men ran in the direction of the flames, and it appeared that several men and children had already been struck by machine gun fire. The guard turned as if to join the others but stopped and gave me a peculiar look. His face seemed softer and his eyes kinder; he moved his free hand slightly and pointed toward the border gate. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me; I blinked them several times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. Again he moved his hand and waved it toward the border. Ali was oblivious to this, but Nassar noticed everything.

"Yalla," the guard yelled, "yalla." He looked one last time at the children and then at me. He waved his hand toward the border, "imshi," he uttered for us to go away. He then abruptly turned and ran to join the others.

"Hiyah, hiyah," Nassar shouted to the driver to go. The driver looked confused and hesitated for a moment. First he looked at Ali and then back at Nassar.

"Imshi, imshi," I screamed for the guard to go now and leaned forward in my seat.

Ali was infuriated and started to swear and then lunged toward me. Nassar spoke rapid and stern Arabic to the driver while restraining Ali. Whatever Nassar said made the driver stomp on the gas. The sedan swerved in the desert sand and raced through the checkpoint. Machine-gun fire riddled toward the sedan; one bullet caused a shower of glass to explode throughout the car. A scream from my youngest daughter Kali pierced the air as glass shattered all around us.

The driver hesitated for a moment and the sedan began to slow down. "Imshi, imshi" I reached behind the driver and grabbed his neck; I applied as much pressure as I could. "Go," I screamed in English.

The driver pressed the accelerator to the floor and the sedan took off again swerving and swinging wildly in the sand. Through muffled and estranged words I could hear the driver cursing me.

As we crossed the border into the no man's land, the land that stood between Libya and Egypt, the gunfire slowed and started to fade. Nassar instructed the driver to slow down, I released some pressure and

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eventually my hand from the driver's throat. Nassar looked at me and smiled faintly while an irritated driver rubbed his throat. Ali angrily puffed his cigarette, "Olivia, Allah will punish you...curse..."

"Momma," a whimper from the rear of the sedan made my heart flutter. Through tears of fear, I anxiously pulled each child over the seat and examined them for blood. Their tiny bodies were shaking uncontrollably as I tried to cradle each one in my arms. My hands trembled as I searched the children's bodies. The children could hear Ali swearing and yelling at me. Nassar told Ali to be quiet and not move. I held the children close as they shivered in my arms. I was relieved to find that as far as their flesh was concerned that they were not injured. They had minor scratches from broken glass, but thank God they were unharmed and physically safe, for now.

"I love you, I love you," I whispered over and over to my children.

As the car descended down the hill, I could see the Egyptian border gates, tears of relief poured down my cheeks. "Thank you Jesus," I whispered.

Nassar instructed the driver to slow down and pull to the side of the road onto the sand. Because of the speed of the sedan, large clouds of dust swirled around the sedan causing any visibility to be almost impossible.

"Madame, are the bambinos okay?" Nassar looked intensely at each one of the children. "Are they okay?"

I detected a note of fear in his usual stern and low voice. I could tell by the look in his eyes how much the children meant to him. Meanwhile, Ali was more concerned about the damage to the sedan and the cigarette burn in his Armani pants.

"Yes," I assured my children's guard that they were alright.

"Alhamdulillah,"

Momma," Alexis spoke softly in Arabic, "are you okay?" Her long black eyelashes surrounded huge hazel eyes while dark reddish brown hair framed a light olive face. Delicate and slender fingers reached toward my face and gently touched my cheek.

I tried to speak, but emotions choked my words.

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“Don’t cry, Momma,” Anthony’s tanned little face was filled with concern. His big brown eyes started to tear, “Momma, you said Jesus would protect us and...” he nervously began to twirl his light brown hair streaked golden by the hot Sahara sun. “You said He would help us like the man with the big lions and he did.”

I couldn’t speak, but I nodded my head up and down. Kali lifted her round face toward me. She looked similar to her older sister, but her hair was a light golden brown and her face was a darker olive. “Your Jesus loves us Momma,” she reached her tiny fingers toward me.

I grabbed her hand and kissed it. I realized at that moment that my children’s faith in Jesus was more than mine had ever been.

“Come here you little monkeys,” Nassar put his arms around the children.

The children couldn’t help but giggle which infuriated Ali. I rested my head against the door. “Madame, we are going to stop for awhile,” Nassar whispered in English. “There was a problem back there...I mean we had gone to great measures to ensure that you and the children would be allowed to leave Libya undetected...but something happened. Ali’s father paid a lot of money for you and your children’s safety...but something happened...I mean someone must have gotten to the men we bribed.” Nassar leaned his weary head against the back of the leather seat; he cursed Ali in Arabic. “There is another border, but it is the Egyptian border, and you should be safe,” Nassar opened his eyes and kissed Anthony’s forehead. “But there could be a problem, so we must wait until we get word.” Nassar instructed the driver in Arabic to turn down a very small and secluded road.

I wanted to ask Nassar why we had to stop and who or what we were waiting for, but I knew it was useless to ask questions that I really did not want to know the answers for.

“Okay,” I smiled slightly. “Thank you.”

“Momma,” Anthony’s voice was sweet but wise, “you need to sleep, and you look so tired.” He stopped twirling his hair and leaned over to whisper in my ear, “Momma, don’t worry, Nassar will take care us.” He tenderly kissed my cheek. “I know that your Jesus will help Nassar too if someone tries to hurt us.”

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I closed my eyes and must have dozed off because when I opened them the sun was just beginning to rise. I could hear Nassar instructing the driver to start the engine and proceed slowly toward the checkpoint. Ali twitched in his seat and became more irritable as we descended towards the illuminated lights of the border and first Egyptian checkpoint. As the next checkpoint came nearer, I feared I would have to endure another anti-American demonstration on the Egyptian side as well. My fears were alleviated when we approached the border and there was no one in view except a couple of border guards that snapped to attention as we approached and shouldered their rifle. There were no demonstrators, but one problem still loomed over our heads. I did not know if me and the children had proper traveling papers. Without current Libyan traveling documents, the children and I could be sent back to Libya and I could be imprisoned or worse. We were Americans and did not have the dual Libyan and American citizenship that Ali held.

“Marhaba,” Nassar greeted the guards.

The men nodded. “Very good car,” one man commented in Arabic, he appeared to be a captain or of higher rank than the other men.

Ali beamed while Nassar ignored his statement. The guard walked around the sedan and pointed to the bullet holes. He then motioned toward the guard station and yelled in Arabic. Two more heavily armed guards appeared out of nowhere. Nassar saw the guards and quickly exited the sedan, he began to speak to the guard in rapid Arabic. He then spoke in the Egyptian dialect, I couldn’t understand much of the conversation. I saw Nassar reach for his wallet. The other two guards peered into the sedan and stared at me. I lowered my eyes and cradled my children. Ali was swearing in Arabic underneath his breath.

“Americana?” One of the other guards asked Nassar if there was someone very important in the car.

Nassar ignored the guard and then walked over toward Ali’s side of the sedan. I could hear him tell Ali that the guard wanted more gold or money.

Ali became furious and yelled, “They are not worth that much.” Ali’s outburst frightened the children and tears started to swell in their eyes. “I want to go back to Benghazi...I don’t...”

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“Uskut,” Nassar snapped at Ali and then leaned over to Ali’s ear and whispered. I don’t know what he said, but Ali’s reaction was to shut up and remain quiet.

Nassar opened the back passenger door and bent down to talk to the children. “Shh, bambinos,” Nassar whispered tenderly and then spoke quietly in Arabic to them. Several minutes passed while I watched the guards as they watched Nassar.

“Promise?” Anthony whispered.

“Promise,” Nassar kissed Anthony’s cheeks and then each one of the girls’ foreheads. “Madame,” Nassar nodded at me, “I must give the men more money or gold.”

“Okay,” I started to slip several of the gold bracelets off my arm.

“La,” he shook his head and smiled gently. He reached underneath the seat and opened a purple velvet satchet that contained several heavy gold necklaces and bracelets. Nassar fingered them sadly. “Sorry Madame, I was instructed to give these to you and the bambinos, but I must...”

“It’s okay,” I assured Nassar.

“La, la,” Ali hissed, “that is mine...”

“Uskut,” Nassar took the satchet and then walked over to the guards. The main guard looked inside and smiled; he patted Nassar on the back and then praised Allah. He yelled for the men to let us pass through the border and the checkpoint.

We drove along the sea toward a city named Alexandria and stopped at several compounds on the way. When we came to the first villa several heavily armed guards stood outside the walls. Nassar greeted the guards warmly. We exited the sedan briefly and then we were ushered into a black Range Rover. As we left, I noticed that a dark blue Mercedes Benz followed behind us. I kept turning around to see who it was but decided to stop as all it was doing was making me car sick. Nassar didn’t seem to be bothered, so I allowed myself to relax.

After several hours I asked Nassar if we could stop for food and water.

“Yes, Madame,” Nassar held Anthony in his lap and the girls’ head rested on each one of his muscular legs. “We will stop when it is safer,” he smiled.

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I knew better than to ask what exactly safer meant. After we passed several more oases, Nassar finally pointed to a smaller and secluded oasis with a small souk (store). By then it was around noon. From the outside the souk looked like a small adobe hut. Inside the floor was clean, and the smell of freshly baked flat bread called khubz or (khubz esh) filled the air and mingled with the scent of lamb. The smell of fresh fruits tantalized our senses. The aroma of the familiar Arabic sandwich called shawerma was delectable. (Shawerma was lamb meat cooked over an open fire on a spit enveloped in the pocket bread mixed with hot sauce, salad, and tahinah.) While the children and I ate, I became aware of Ali and Nassar in another verbal discussion outside the souk. Although I could not make out the entire conversation, it was apparent that it was over the guard Nassar paid when we entered Egypt and Ali's actions as we left Libya earlier. I heard Nassar accuse Ali of sabotaging our trip. This infuriated Ali and he began to yell and scream. Nassar remained firm and continued to interrogate Ali.

Begrudgingly, we were all ushered into the Range Rover after we finished our snack. As we left the oasis; I noticed that there were now two cars behind us and one in front of us.

We continued to drive up the Nile River toward Cairo. When we finally reached the ancient city, it was late afternoon and we were all exhausted. We drove to a secluded flat that was hidden behind a gold store. We exited the SUV while the driver parked the vehicles. Getting to the flat posed a challenge. Once we went thru the souk, we had to go through heavily guarded doors where Ali had to show some kind of official looking documents.

We were directed to several freight elevators. Nassar and Anthony took one elevator while Ali, I, and the girls took another. The elevators groaned as we ascended. I did not trust the reliability of the rusty, timeworn freight elevator. I tried to think of the proper procedure in case the elevator failed, but I could not recall one thing. I ground my teeth together as the elevator screeched into a jerky upward movement. I was almost overwhelmed by the desire to wrap my finger through the rusted grate that posed as walls. I was relieved when the car stopped and a guard opened the door and we were allowed to exit. We followed the guard through several corridors. Along the way I admired the older Egyptian building's charm; I marveled at the skill and craftsmanship in the woodwork as branches enter twined and pictures were revealed within the intricate carvings. I felt like I was in a

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maze; wherever we were destined it was evident that it was secluded and isolated.

Exhausted, the children and I started to lag behind and as we started down yet another flight of stairs, I noticed that Anthony was the weakest. Anthony's weakened state repulsed Ali, and he shot a stare that would have intimidated Anthony if he had not been so tired. Ali threatened Anthony to move quickly or else. The only effect that Ali's threat had on Anthony was that he moved closer to Nassar and clung tightly to his leg. Nassar picked the boy up and lifted him high on his shoulders and shot Ali a nasty look.

A little further down the hall a room opened up. I looked around and noticed several wooden doors. Nassar produced a key that opened one of them. We entered a room that was old but clean and very charming. Although the rooms had no windows, the floors were a smooth, highly polished wood, accented with beautiful Persian rugs. The door frames were carved with intricate olive branches and grape vines intertwined.

The children were drawn to the bedroom where they found a television set. Alexis was the first to discover the knob and squealed with delight when it clicked and produced an illuminated screen. Even though the cartoons were not in English, the familiar characters of Donald and Mickey crossed the screen and evoked giggles from my children. Their laughter was always a delight to me, and I peeked into the room to watch them. I stood entranced by their beauty and marveled at the innocence they had maintained throughout this ordeal and thanked God. When they finally fell asleep, I kissed each of them on the forehead and clicked off the television. When I left the room, I left the door open so I could hear them if they needed me. I went to a vacant bedroom and sat on a love seat. I cracked the door so I could at least hear and see some of what was going on.

The driver entered a short time later and whispered in Ali's ear; they left the main flat.

"Madame," Nassar knocked on the door. "I am going to get the children some juice, bread, olives, fruit, and cheese for their evening meal."

"Shukran."

ALEXANDRIA PEARL

“Please Madame, don’t try and escape...for your safety you must remain in the flat...there will be men outside the door...sorry Madame but it is for our own good.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

Nassar bid me goodbye. I heard him summon additional men to stand outside the door. Ali and several heavily armed men arrived shortly. A loud knock on the door revealed additional men. These men were dressed in expensive and tailored Italian clothing. Ali answered and greeted the men with respect. The men spoke privately with Ali for a half hour or so. I heard Nassar enter and announce that he had food and chocolates for the bambinos. Ali was angry at Nassar for leaving and started to badger him.

“Ali, your children...the children must eat...it is your duty...but you are only concerned about yourself and your women.”

“My dear friend,” Ali tried to defend himself, “that is not true...you know...”

“Enough,” Nassar knocked on my door and handed me several packages of food. “For you and your children,” he tenderly smiled.

“Thank you,” I looked at my guard. I couldn’t help but notice how attractive he looked even though his eyes were filled with concern and the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes were visible.

“Enough, enough,” Ali raised his hands in defeat. “Olivia,” Ali called for me, “come Olivia let the men see your beauty...at one time she was unbelievably beautiful,” Ali cackled.

“Uskut,” Nassar snapped at Ali. “We have business to discuss...important business.” Again the men spoke in hushed tones and smoked fervently. It was getting late when the men, Ali, and Nassar prepared to leave the flat.

“Olivia,” Ali spoke harshly from outside my door, “do not leave this flat...or else.”

I didn’t answer and waited until I heard all of the men leave the flat before I opened my door. I went to the children’s bedroom and tried to offer the children bread and juice but they were so tired they could not even open their eyes. I even tried to entice them with chocolate but their eyes remained closed.

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I was so exhausted that I sat down on the couch, I wanted to be close enough to hear the children if they awoke. I tried to stay awake but I was exhausted. I was awakened at dawn by someone trying to unlock the door. I rubbed my eyes and sat up. The door slowly opened and in staggered Ali; his Polo shirt had red lipstick on the collar and he reeked of alcohol and cheap perfume.

Nassar entered and informed Ali that we would be leaving soon. Ali started to swear in Arabic and told Nassar that he did not want to leave that he wanted to go back to Libya. Nassar dismissed Ali and told me to gather the children and their belongings. While the children dressed, Nassar and Ali began to argue again. I urged the children to eat quickly.

“Madame and the bambinos are leaving...I promised your father...no exceptions this time,” Nassar’s voice was low but very gruff. “Allah will see to it this time...”

Ali insisted that Nassar turn the airplane tickets over to him so he could cash them in as he had done before. Nassar refused. There was a knock on the door, and then the door flung open. Three men dressed in military fatigues entered; they greeted Ali and Nassar. The children and I immediately slipped into the bedroom, I instructed the children to watch television while I peeked out the door during the commotion. The men all spoke in hushed tones; I saw one of the men give Ali several packages and what appeared to be official documents in manila folders. Ali retrieved his briefcase and our entire luggage. Ali picked up one of his luggage pieces and the men nodded their approval. I watched in silence as Ali knelt and unlocked the lock. He shoved the packages under some of his clothing and then locked the lock again. He put the documents in his briefcase. The men then praised Allah and informed Nassar and Ali that the luggage would be at the airport when they arrived and would have already cleared customs and be loaded onto the plane. As the men prepared to leave Ali started to engage them in a conversation. The men ignored him and exited with the luggage.

“How dare they,” Ali demanded, “who dares treat me...”

“Uskut,” Nassar snapped at Ali. He walked to the bedroom door and knocked. I opened the door. “Madame we must leave soon,” he smiled and then took the children by the hand and gathered their backpacks. He guided them toward the hallway.

## ALEXANDRIA PEARL

“Okay,” I quickly grabbed my purse and sweater.

“The cars are ready...please hurry.”

Nassar and Ali fought all the way to the airport. I was not convinced that we would really make it to the Cairo Airport. Ali had tricked me before into believing that we were headed to America only to find myself back in Benghazi. Ali took a sadistic pleasure in my disappointments. I could not restrain a sigh of relief when I realized that we followed the upward flow of the Nile River. If we had followed the downward flow of the Nile River, it would have led us toward the sea, back to Alexandria, back to Libya and ultimately back to the villa.

We eventually arrived at the Cairo airport. I recognized the men in uniform as they discreetly nodded and stood at attention by the terminal gate. While Ali was occupied with the men and luggage issues, I grabbed the children and followed Nassar through the gate and boarded the plane. This plane was much nicer than the one we had arrived on when we first arrived in Libya. I noticed Nassar slip another bribe to a military guard.

Once we entered the plane, Anthony asked his beloved guard if he too was coming with us.

Nassar kissed my son on both of his cheeks, “Anthony, my dear friend, I cannot come this time...”

Anthony nervously twirled his hair as he realized that his guard would not be accompanying him. “But what if Daddy Ali takes us to those bad places again?”

Nassar hushed Anthony with an embrace and whispered endearments in Arabic. I could not help but notice the tears that formed in his eyes as he held my son tightly. Nassar reached under his oxford shirt; he removed a heavy rope eighteen karat gold necklace with several charms and handed them to my son. “Whenever you need me just remember...for you and your sisters to always remember me by.”

“But Nassar,” Alexis said grabbing frantically for his hands. “What if Daddy Ali hurts Momma again?”

I could not bear to listen to or watch my children as they said their goodbye to their much-loved guard. I turned my head away from my children and rested it on the window. At this moment my children were safe, but once Nassar left there were no guarantees. I still did not know if

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we were traveling to America or to some other unknown destination. I closed my eyes. I could hear Ali enter the plane and engage one of the pilots in conversation. I opened my eyes for a moment and watched as Ali pulled out several documents from his briefcase. I recognized the green eagle emblem. It was the symbol of the Libyan Jamahiriya "State of the Masses," a sign of the all-powerful régime. I wondered how one bird could symbolize two such diverse cultures. In comparison the Libyan eagle had been the sign of the military force and political power while in my country it symbolized a fight for freedom from oppression.

"Olivia," Nassar called me by my American name. He had never done this before.

As I opened my eyes and looked at my guard, tears formed in his dark brown eyes. His long black eyelashes fluttered for several seconds. I knew he was doing his best to control his emotions. I forced a smile as a knot formed in my throat. There was so much that I had needed and wanted to say to this man, but all I could do was bid him farewell. "Ma'assalama," my voice squeaked like a mouse, I swallowed and then inhaled. "Ma'assalama," I said a little louder this time. My knees and arms were shaking; I diverted my eyes away from my guard's sorrow-filled face.

Nassar began to walk toward me. He grabbed the children's hands and led them to the seats in front of me. He placed each one in their seat and fastened their seatbelts. I stood up and kissed each one of my children's soft head of hair.

"Olivia," Nassar leaned toward me as to embrace me but froze as he heard Ali call his name.

"Nassar," Ali screamed. The children cringed as the sound of Ali's voice reverberated around the plane.

"Goodbye, Madame," Nassar said staring directly into my eyes, "May Allah protect you and your children... always." Nassar hesitated for a moment. "May Allah's will be done forever...may I see you..."

"Insha allah," I said surprisingly. Insha allah meant that hopefully Allah listens or does what we ask when we seek him.

"Insha allah," Nassar echoed. He turned and walked toward Ali. "Good bye." he waved one last time and blew kisses to each one of the children.

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“Hurry up.” Ali put his arm around Nassar. “She’s not worth your goodbyes. I have something to show you.”

Nassar brushed Ali’s arm away.

I turned my attention back to the children. I wouldn’t allow myself to think about Nassar, but I knew that I would be the children’s sole protector wherever this plane landed. I nervously looked around the plane. I found it odd that the very few people that boarded the plane had not sat anywhere close to the children and me. It was as if we had the plague. I attempted to ask a man and woman dressed in traditional Islamic clothing where the plane was headed as they walked past my seat. Both of them ignored me and acted frightened. I shrugged my shoulders; I had grown accustomed to this type of treatment.

“Olivia,” Ali yelled. “Be quiet and sit still.” I hadn’t thought he could see me but apparently I was wrong. I tried to look through the cracks in the seats to see if Nassar was with him or if he’d left. I couldn’t see anything except Ali.

“Momma,” Kali was growing tired and cranky.

I pulled Italian chocolates and several Disney books from my backpack and handed them to Alexis. I knew she would divide the candy evenly and give her brother and sister their favorite book.

As the plane began to taxi around the runway, I leaned toward the children and told them that I was going to rest my eyes for a moment. I was so tired, I knew I was deathly ill but hadn’t realized how fatigued I had become.

“Sleep, Momma,” Anthony whispered through the seats. His little voice held tears, and I knew that all of the children must be suffering a great loss. “Jesus will protect us.” Anthony reached his little fingers through the seat, and I grabbed and stroked his fingers until I dozed off.

Suddenly I was jolted awake as the wind caused the plane to rock and pitch. The voice of the captain came on in Arabic and told us not to worry and informed us that the turbulence was only air pockets. I must have fallen asleep and slept through take-off. I nervously checked around for Nassar, but he was gone. Another jerk of the plane brought me to attention. My eyes darted around the plane as I searched for the children. The plane regained its gentle rocking motion and jerked again. This

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caused me to anxiously search the plane until I found my three children. They were all nestled together in the seats in front of me.

Alexis' smile that had once been sweet and unblemished and had lightened a room when she entered had taken on a more mature and motherly expression. It saddened me that my daughter had seen so much pain at her young age. Her light olive skin had tanned throughout the year yet remained supple. Her hair resembled mine at the beginning of our captivity; it hung strong and wispy over her shoulders and turned up gently at the end. Anthony's golden brown hair mingled with hers as he leaned over the seat and was asleep on Alexis' shoulder. In Anthony's arms was a stuffed ally cat that he had brought from America and had rescued from the trash many times over the year. Its ears were now limp and its neck refused to hold the head up any longer. The cat was still his most prized guardian. On Alexis' lap was her younger sister Kali. Her tiny arms tightly clutched onto her favorite stuffed pink lamb. Kali, who had been only two when this trip had begun, now took on the mannerisms of a child much older. Her hair was lighter than Alexis' but curly. It surrounded a more rounded face than her older siblings and reminded me of the olive face of a cherub.

Relieved, I looked back to the window. I marveled at the difference a year immersed in an Islamic culture could have on me. Upon my first encounter with this language I had thought of it as only gibberish. As I looked out the window of the 747, my reflection in the glass was a stranger. A faint, sad, smile graced my lips as I realized the irony of it all. I wore the same dress I had arrived in a year ago, and it did not need a voice to tell the horrible things the children and I had overcome the past year.

When we left for Libya the black tea-length dress accented with red and yellow roses, had been crisp, well fitted, and my favorite. By my crude calculations I had lost over forty pounds and my hair was falling out in patches; I couldn't help but wonder what truly caused the rapid weight loss. My fingers followed the edge of the scooped neck. Suddenly I felt self-conscious of the depth and tugged it upward slightly. I found myself restless and tried to poke the fringe of the side seam that was nicked by Ali's sister when she needed a piece of my clothes for the spirit man to place a curse on me. The fringed seam would not cooperate, and I finally gave up. As my hand extended up to my hair, I wanted to cry. My once thick and healthy dark auburn hair now lay thin and lifeless against

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sunken cheeks devoid of color. As tears filled my lifeless eyes, I barely recognized my reflection as it stared back at me. The days of little fluids had left my face, lips and skin dull and cracked to the point of bleeding.

A reflection in the window made my heart flutter. I closed and opened my eyes several times. I thought I saw my mother. I closed my eyes and opened them again. The reflection still did not move. I closed my eyes again and told myself I was hallucinating.

I could hear Ali's voice as it droned on about his importance to his country and how the documents he held would ensure his freedom upon landing in any country. I didn't turn around to see who he was talking to; I had become numb to Ali and his missions. I did however manage a sympathetic smile; I knew the true fate that awaited Ali if this plane landed in America. Charges of rape, fraud, assault and numerous other charges remained in effect from the prior year. I hoped that this District Attorney would not let the charges drop as other District Attorneys had done on previous occasions. I wondered why Ali always seemed to elude the charges that were sought against him. Many times he had bragged about his illegal activities. He also spoke openly about his specific knowledge of certain valuable information that he used to entice our Government when he got into trouble. I allowed the thought of freedom from Ali to enter my mind briefly. But the pain and havoc he inflicted upon other innocent people was unthinkable. I could feel my knees quivering and my back started to shudder. I stopped myself from pondering Ali's plight; I had enough to worry about. I really wondered if we were really en route home this time or another one of Ali's follies. I guess I would just have to wait; anywhere had to be better than Libya. Hours of clouds and endless open sea awaited us before I would see the majestic Twin Towers or the precious Lady that guarded the harbor of my beloved country.

I opened my eyes again and thought I saw a woman who resembled my mother standing behind me. I turned quickly but saw no one there except Ali and one of his men who were self absorbed with some documents. I closed my eyes and told myself that I was just hallucinating because I was fatigued; my mother had been dead for almost two decades.

"Please Jesus let us be en route to America this time, please," I prayed quietly. "We had gone to Egypt once before under the pretense of leaving Libya only to find ourselves tricked by Ali. Maybe this time would be different...please Jesus...Nassar had held our passports; so maybe we

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were really going home...please Father let us go home.” I forced myself not to cry but several rebellious tears formed and escaped. I sighed. A strong yet sudden feeling of peace enveloped me; my heart became somewhat lighter. Somehow this trip felt different; I felt different. I had found my God, my children believed in him and loved Jesus. I didn't want to get my hopes up again, but I knew something was going to change in my life, I just wasn't sure what.

It was unimaginable that the children and I had been entrapped in Libya for a year. If I had known for an instant what torment and pain we would have been put through, I never would have agreed to travel to Malta for a supposed wedding. But then again, what choice did I have? Ali was in trouble with the FBI, the police, INS, and other country's governments had wanted to retaliate against him, not to mention all of the Americans that he defrauded and hurt. Tears stung my eyes, and I could feel sand floating down my eyelashes. I had tried all of the conventional means that women were taught in America on how to leave an abusive husband. But each time Ali found the shelter, and then bribed and or conned the police or someone else into giving up my location. I really had no choice, or had I? I never should have believed his sisters; I knew better than to trust them. At the time the idea of traveling to Malta for Ali's sister's wedding was a good excuse to get Ali out of the country and into the hands of his family. After all, I had their solemn word that if I brought Ali to Malta then they would force him back to Libya, and the children and I would be allowed to return home, safely and without retaliation from Ali. That was the only way I knew I could ever rid myself of him was to make him leave American soil. But it didn't work out that way; it definitely had not gone as planned.

Cautiously, I opened my eyes and slowly turned back toward the window. There was nothing and definitely no one there. My mother was murdered when I was a child. It had been a long time since I could even remember what she looked like. It had been an even longer time since I had really allowed myself to think about her. As the plane gently rocked I closed my eyes and traveled back in time hoping to find an answer as to how I had managed to get into such chaos.

Olivia attempts to regain her American children's freedom from oppression.

## **Forbidden Prayers**

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