

# **Anissa of Syria**

A CHRISTIAN REFUGEE'S SAGA  
FROM THE SYRIAN WAR TO  
THE AMERICAN DREAM

**The Love of Antioch Series – Book 1**

**by**

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To the people of Syria. The world let you down.

*A shootout ensued and part of me felt too resigned to fate to move – almost as if a preordained defeat had left me stuck to the sofa, waiting to die from a bullet or a knife-wielding Islamist. But then the impassioned words spoken by my father not even an hour ago bellowed through my mind: “..you can do far more for us from America than you can from here, where you’re just another defenseless Christian.”*

*I had to survive this nightmare, I told myself. I somehow had to make a difference, from a position of power and strength – not like this. I realized that I had to flee, however I could, in whatever minutes of fighting remained. I dropped to the floor, getting on my hands and knees to stay below the gunfire, as I scrambled further into our house, until I reached the corner, where I turned left towards the stairs. With the sound of fighting and shots still raging on the other side of the wall now protecting me, I stood and sprinted up the stairs as fast as I could to my room, until I reached my bags.*

# Chapter 1: Anissa

(Diary)

∞ Friday, February 7, 2014 ∞

To My Dearest,

With mere words, how do I tell you about the destruction of everything in my young life – all that I loved and lived for? How can I explain to you what sustained me through unimaginable evil, when I myself don't know the answer? And after I survived it, but with a soul that was hollowed into a nihilistic ache, how did I manage to carry on, even as unbearable memories pursued me everywhere, like a pack of wolves hounding their prey?

As much as I wish I could tell you everything, there are details that I just can't talk about right now. They're too overwhelming – I'll never make it through the telling. No human being should ever have to remember, much less share, certain events. Sometimes emotional survival means deceiving everyone – including yourself. And ever since that infernal night, on January 18, 2012, I've been trying to lie to myself by pretending that certain things didn't happen – because sometimes it's the only way for me to stay sane. So I don't know if I'll ever tell you those details. With God's mercy, maybe I'll finally believe the falsehoods that I recite to myself every night in bed, in the hope that I can, at last, sleep with some solace. And if that happens, then even you, My Dearest, will never know those details, because the lies of my imagination will be all that I can remember.

For now, I'll begin with the last time that I saw my parents, and my escape from Syria in 2012; then I'll skip to my first years in the United States, and the rays of hope that gradually crept back into my life. Along the way, if I still haven't expunged from my mind the darkest night of all – the one that nearly finished me – maybe I'll summon the strength to share more. Perhaps by trying to recount to you that night sent by Satan himself, I will better understand the hazy madness that my life became – a journey that brought me to the depths of despair and loneliness, but later to a hope and love that I never thought could enter my life after so much pain and darkness. If, one day, I am able to find the fortitude to stare January 18, 2012 directly in the face, and then hand it to you as I see it, then you will know that I somehow began to emerge from this black hole reborn, with a renewed spirit.

But before I try to tell you anything else, let me give you a little

background to my story. Until the Syrian Civil War began, our family enjoyed a peaceful and affluent life. We lived in a three-story townhouse in the al-Maljaa quarter of Homs, the third-largest city in Syria. We had a maid from the Philippines named Marisol, who lived in our home since before I was born. Besides maintaining the house, she helped to ensure that we were always speaking English on a daily basis, even when we weren't at school. My father worked as a doctor in the National Hospital in Homs, run by the Syrian Ministry of Health, and had a small but growing business importing medical devices into Syria. He also served as the leader of the Syriac Orthodox Christian community in Homs and was considered one of the city's most important Christian representatives. My mother ran a small pharmacy and her income, combined with my father's, allowed us to live a very comfortable life, and enabled my three siblings and me to attend the most prestigious international school in our city, where we learned English at a very young age. We had a boisterously affectionate but protective German Shepherd named Roy. He would often run around on the grass in our gated front yard, which connected – by narrow, grassy passageways along the sides of our house – to an equally large backyard.

The Syrian Civil War began in mid-March of 2011. At the time, I was fifteen years old; my older brother, Firaz, was twenty-one; my older sister, Maria, was nineteen; and my younger brother, Antoun, was eleven. We were all very close, but also very different. Firaz had recently finished his mandatory, twenty-one-month service in the Syrian Army and was studying business administration. He had grown into a big, strong man, and something of a local heartthrob. But Firaz was very serious and almost the complete opposite of Antoun, who was the family jester. My younger brother was always playing pranks, telling jokes, and generally causing mischief (although that was partly due to his age and the fact that our mother coddled him to no end). Antoun was also obsessed with football, and broke more than his share of windows kicking his ball around. Maria was the family musician: a child prodigy on the violin who went on to study at the Institute of Music in Homs with a bright future as a concert performer. And I was a young scholar who loved to learn, consistently performed at the top of her class, and dreamed of someday attending a university in Europe or the United States. My parents often pushed me towards the future study of medicine, and I would always tell them how much I hated the sight of blood.

But there was a lot of blood from the civil war. By the end of April

2011, about 1,000 civilians and hundreds of policemen and soldiers had been killed. And as the conflict dragged on and world powers did nothing, the violence became progressively sectarian.

Violent clashes between government security forces and protestors intensified, as demonstrators increasingly armed themselves. By mid-May, the military had asserted total control over our city, but the unrest continued and religious bloodshed only mounted, as Syrian Army soldiers defected in greater numbers to join an increasingly Sunni Muslim-dominated insurgency. My happy childhood memories became more and more polluted by images of prolonged street fighting between security forces and rebels, who gained control of several quarters of the city.

The so-called “Arab Spring” had brought a wave of popular protests for greater freedoms across the Middle East, including in Syria. The country’s leader, Bashar al-Assad, like his father, Hafez Assad, had always ruled Syria with an iron fist. In the Middle East, the weak perish quickly and autocratic rule seems to be the most effective governing system to combat extremism and overcome so many tribal, religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences. Indeed, the Arab Middle East has no history of successful democracies – Lebanon and Iraq came closest, but both also suffered from chronic instability and bloody civil wars.

Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father’s rule in June 2000 with some hint that he would introduce reforms to soften his father’s brutal dictatorial rule. But the political realities greatly limited what he could actually do. The Assads hailed from the Alawite sect of Shia Islam and, like Christians, were religious minorities in a country of 18 million people who were mostly Sunni Muslims.

Four decades of Assad rule meant that the Alawite sect comprised the de facto political elite. Syria’s 1.5 million Christians were among the religious minorities that supported (and benefited from) the ruling elite, and this made them a natural target for those fighting to topple Assad’s regime. Assad and his allies feared not only losing their decades-long hold on power, but also the bloodbath that would likely follow, in a region where major transitions of power are never peaceful.

Our Christian community – and other religious minorities in Syria – also feared vicious persecution by the religious majority. We saw what happened to the Christians just across our border, in Iraq, when the secular regime there ended. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, sectarian killings, persecution of Christians, and an increasingly Islamist political

culture, prompted more than half of the Iraqi Christian population to flee an area where Christians had lived for thousands of years. And the same thing could easily happen to us in Syria, if the secular regime were to collapse. Sunni Muslim mobs or terrorist groups could brutalize us with impunity or even tacit government support. Christians had lived in the land of Syria for millennia – many hundreds of years before Arab Muslim conquerors arrived in the seventh century – but our future there was anything but certain.

In the weeks before Christmas of 2011, about fifty Christians in my city had been killed in the anti-government unrest, by both rebels and government forces, while many more were struggling to feed their families as the bloodletting brought normal life in the city to a halt. In one incident, a young Christian boy was killed by the rebels, who filmed the murder and then claimed that Assad's forces had killed him. Another Christian was seized by the rebels, taken to a house, and asked, "How do you want to die?" The man was eventually released, but reportedly continued to suffer from severe psychological distress. Hearing about such callous brutality and cruelty ominously chipped away at whatever sense of security I had felt before the civil war began.

As the conflict ground on, there were more and more guns on the street. The regime's forces increased their presence, but so did other groups of armed men patrolling the streets. Some of these gunmen were army deserters who refused orders to fire on protesters, but many were radical Islamists who wanted to plunge Syria into sectarian chaos. These violent extremists had no interest in the democratic aspirations that motivated the first anti-government protests; they just wanted to bring down the secular Syrian state.

By Christmas 2011, the violence between rebels and government troops had claimed over 5,000 lives in Syria, and almost one-third of those deaths had happened in my city. Not surprisingly, many Christian families fled Homs, leaving behind their possessions, jobs, and homes. Some of those who chose to stay were too afraid to step outside to go to work, and so were suffering tremendous financial hardship. Few dared to be out after 3 p.m. or on Fridays, when the streets were most dangerous. The Christian areas of our city were surrounded by rebels. Insurgents would sometimes try to escape into those neighborhoods, and then would be hunted down there by the army, leaving horrible violence, death, and destruction in their wake.

These were the dark clouds casting a pall over the last Christmas

that I spent with my family, as we met for our annual holiday reunion. We tried to pretend that life was normal when coming together with our cousins from Raqqa (in northern Syria), but Christmas of 2011 felt hauntingly different – like it might very well be the last time that we would all be together.

## Chapter 2: Anissa

∞ Saturday, February 8, 2014 ∞

To My Dearest,

I became too exhausted while writing to you last night, but now I'll continue where I left off about the last Christmas that I spent with my family, in 2011. My maternal uncle, Luke, lived in Raqqa with his wife and three children, and would normally take his family on the five-hour drive southwest to our house for the Christmas and New Year's holidays. But in 2011, to enjoy a more peaceful experience away from the violent chaos of Homs, our families traveled to pray at the Saint George de Mishtaya monastery, which is about thirty miles west of our hometown. The ancient site lies in the lush area known as "Valley of the Christians," whose hillsides are dotted with countless almond trees. Across the valley stands the striking Krak des Chevaliers, a beautiful and well-preserved, Crusades-era castle.

We gathered in the monastery's basilica, built in the sixth century. My fifty-five-year-old father, who stood about five-feet-ten inches tall, wore a white dress shirt and dark slacks. He seemed to be aging faster under the relentless pressures of the war thrashing our city. He had lost nearly all of the hair on the top of his head and his signature brown mustache was sprinkled with some white hairs. My mother, a five-foot-four bundle of energy, was fifty-two years old at the time. She too seemed older, with deepening crow's feet by her green eyes and some white streaks running through her black hair.

In accordance with tradition, each female covered her head with a prayer shawl and sat on one side of the room, with the men on the opposite side nearby. All of the congregants asked God to restore peace to our country. As the bishop passed along the aisles of the church, blessing those in attendance, we crossed ourselves.

After the bishop's benediction, we sang the Christmas hymns, which at times seemed discordantly upbeat, given what was happening in Syria. With the music of our singing in the background, I looked at the church candles and thought about the surreal connection between images and memory. The peaceful and joyous candles flickering there during the Christmas ceremony projected warmth, comfort, and familiarity – even though they emitted the same kind of fiery energy as

the flames caused by war. How could a conflagration sparked by regime airstrikes or Molotov cocktails have anything to do with a Christmas candle in church? Yet they were both fire: able to illuminate as much as to burn – and now both were part of my life. One moment I could be here with my family, celebrating a religious holiday, and the next moment we could all be in mortal danger from the blaze of sectarian conflict searing through our city. Everything – happiness, memory, and life itself – began to seem so precarious.

Indeed, just two days before Christmas, my father told us how, on his way back home from the hospital where he worked, he was stopped by an armed man who demanded to see his identity card. Upon seeing my father's Christian surname – Toma – the man told him that he had been very lucky. "Had you been an Alawite, I would have killed you right here," he said, pointing to where my father stood and then slowly moving his index finger chillingly across his throat with a sadistic smile.

After that incident, my father called his brother-in-law, my Uncle Luke, and started to plan for the worst. He asked him to house and care for Maria and Antoun, because Raqqa was much safer for Christians at the time. Both my older sister and younger brother would leave with Uncle Luke after our Christmas reunion, so we loaded up our car with their suitcases before heading to the Saint George de Mishtaya monastery. In Raqqa, Maria would continue with her musical studies and Antoun would transfer to a new elementary school. To keep Antoun from trying to bring his football in an already cramped car – our father promised him that Uncle Luke would buy him an even better ball and some private football lessons.

My parents needed Firaz to stay at home and help with their businesses and just for general security – especially with my mother's pharmacy. After her store was looted by rebels in October, it was moved to the ground floor of our three-story townhouse, which was better protected because of its heavy front door and the nine-foot-tall, wrought-iron fence with spear finials surrounding our front yard. No matter how violent the conflict grew, our pharmacy continued to serve all faiths, and my mother would often note that this would help to shield our family and the pharmacy from the growing sectarian violence in Homs. "None of your goodwill can help if Islamists who are not from this area show up," Firaz corrected her, after the incident with my father. "We need to get a gun to keep by the cash register," he said. My older brother was very protective of the women in the house, and would

have never agreed to leave – even if our parents didn’t need his help. He was too proud, like my father.

But my father insisted that I continue my education in the USA, as soon as possible. The night after he was stopped, he pulled me aside and told me what was on his mind. “Inās,” he began, calling me by my Arabic name, as he always did. “You and your siblings are the most precious part of my life. And of all my children, you have the most potential to go anywhere you wish in this world – your test scores and grades have always been among the highest of your peers. But it’s clear now that you cannot reach your full potential in Syria. Islamist rebels have been gaining the upper hand in this conflict, and – after last night – I told your mother that I would devise a plan for you to leave Syria so that you can fulfill all of your promise in life. Because if the Islamists take over, we have no future as Christians in Syria. And things are getting worse every day, so we cannot wait another day. A darkness is descending upon our land, and we will bear the cross for our faith as Jesus bore it.”

“You’re scaring me, Papa. Why are you saying such things?”

“Because this is our reality now – it’s becoming clearer by the day. And we must confront the world as it is, and not as we wish it to be. You must leave Syria and get the best education you can in the United States and do what you can for your people and your family. In America, you will be safe and can speak for those of us who have no voice. I am working on your visa and discussing arrangements with my brother in New York to receive you.”

My father would work to secure a visa and a flight for me. He had personal connections to Canada’s ambassador to Syria, both through his high position in the government hospital, and thanks to some of his Canadian business contacts who exported their medical devices to him. Those contacts would enable him to obtain a visa for me when it was nearly impossible for anyone else to get one, given the number of people trying to leave Syria any way they could. After the U.S. embassy in Syria closed in June 2011, the demand for a Canadian visa grew exponentially. Once I had mine, my father would book a flight for me from Damascus to London, and then from London to Montreal. His only brother, my Uncle Tony, lived in New York and would pick me up from the Montreal airport and find a way to cross the border illegally with me. Once I was in the United States, I would apply for political asylum and stay with him while finishing my high school studies and seeking

admission to a U.S. college. I would deeply miss Syria and my family and friends there, but attending university in the United States was a dream I had always nurtured, so it was a bittersweet carrot that my parents could dangle in front of me to lower my resistance to the whole plan.

My father had helped Uncle Luke to establish a medical device import business in Raqqa that the two of them jointly owned as partners. But my dad agreed to give him his share of the business to offset the expense of caring for my older sister and younger brother. And so that his brother in New York would have the funds to cover my needs for about twenty months before I was to start college, my father converted enough Syrian pounds to wire Uncle Tony \$10,000 through a bank account that he maintained in France for business purposes. He took that money from his savings account, which dwindled by the day as the war slowed his business (while dramatically raising the cost of everything).

Despite my father's connections to members of Canada's diplomatic corps, everything slowed down around the new year, and it looked as if my visa wouldn't arrive until the second or third week of January 2012. Finally, on the morning of January 18, 2012, I got an SMS from my father: "Got your visa. Bought your ticket. Flight leaves in 2 days. Pack tonight." My stomach turned with nervous excitement at his momentous message. An hour later, I realized that there was no point in staying in class for the rest of the day because I could hardly concentrate and I wouldn't even be showing up again. Homs had descended into unpredictable chaos and mutual suspicion, and I feared that telling anyone of my plans could provoke an envious betrayal of some kind or some other unexpected problem. As much as I loved to learn, it wasn't like there was even much of that happening. I was one of just five students who still bothered to attend school, and sometimes even our teacher didn't show up and we would have to join another class. So I sent an SMS to my mother, letting her know that I would be heading home soon. I snuck out during lunch break without saying goodbye to any of my friends or teachers who happened to be present that day. After spending so many years of my life in that school, I felt oddly unfaithful about ending my last day there with such a surreptitious and unceremonious departure.

With silent farewells still being exchanged in my mind, I made the dangerous trek home from school one last time, using the safer but less direct route that I had found, to avoid the areas where clashes between

rebels and government troops were more frequent. As I finally approached our townhouse, its familiar facade – decorated by the Arab medieval style of black-and-white geometric patterns – seemed to call out to me, maybe because I knew that I was just days away from not returning there for a very long time. But what I didn't know, as I opened the black, wrought iron gate and walked towards the front door of my childhood home, was that it was actually the very last time that I would ever do so.

Marisol greeted me at the door and told me that a warm lunch was waiting. I could smell from the entrance that my mother had asked her to prepare my favorite kofta kebab dish of grilled lamb meat, mixed with garlic and parsley, served on rice with assorted dips and salads. It was a mouth-watering scent intimately connected to home, and I couldn't wait to indulge in the deliciousness with my mother.

I walked further into the first floor of our house and saw her locking up some cabinets that were now used for her pharmacy. She stepped away from the area, approached me with a tired smile, and stretched her arms out for a hug. I lost myself in that embrace with my slightly shorter mother, knowing that this moment of maternal warmth and proximity was another thing that suddenly became infinitely more precious as my departure drew closer.

## Chapter 3: Anissa

∞ Sunday, February 9, 2014 ∞

To My Dearest,

I wasn't able to finish telling you about the day I got my visa, so I'm resuming from the point where I left off: seated at the dining table next to my mother, where I was enjoying a sumptuous, midday meal with her. I guess I should also mention that when I recount conversations to you, these are just the best approximations of my recall (and not verbatim quotations), although there are certain moments that I remember with vivid precision, even from years ago, like the discussion with my mother during our last meal together.

She tried to put me at ease about staying with Uncle Tony, whom I hadn't seen since he last came to visit us when I was just ten. "He's the same good man who let you ride on his shoulders. But you're older now and he'll have to get used to that. Just focus on your schoolwork and be a top student, as you've always been, and I'm sure everything will be fine," she said.

"Is he going to have kofta kebab like this at his house?" I asked sadly, savoring every bite of that delicious lamb dish as if it were my last.

"Inās, your Aunt Christine is a very good cook," she reassured me. Her sympathetic look told me that she knew how much I was struggling to let go of what I had. She then launched into a long list of reminders, admonitions, tips, and ideas for my coming trip. After that, she mentioned something that surprised me because we had never really discussed the topic much – perhaps because she had secretly relied on Maria for such discussions. "Inās, please promise me that you'll stay away from boys until you marry."

"Mom, if I haven't met anyone I like here in Homs, what makes you think it'll be any easier in America?"

"It's not easy anywhere. But here, you had many people who could guide you and watch your back, and look into someone's background for you. Over there, you'll have Uncle Tony and his family, but it's very different. You're going to have a lot more freedom and you'll be meeting people that nobody knows anything about."

"Why is that such a bad thing? I'm going to be seventeen soon!"

"It's not a bad thing, if you're responsible about it. Just don't start

having boyfriends. Wait until you've found your husband."

"And how am I supposed to find a husband if I can't have a boyfriend until then?" I asked ironically.

"No, that's not what I mean." It was clearly an awkward topic for her, so she tried a different approach. "I know that American culture is much more liberal than Syrian culture, but your virginity should be something precious to you, wherever you go. Don't just give it away to anyone. Save it for a man who is worthy. And try to avoid boys in high school – they're usually just trouble at that age. Better just to focus on your studies and keep making us proud. OK?" She gave me that look between bites indicating that she was finished discussing the issue and wasn't going to let us change topics until I expressly agreed to follow her advice.

"OK, Mom."

She smiled in relief. Marisol then brought us a tray of baklava, a pastry made of many thin layers of filo dough filled with ground walnuts and soaked in sugar syrup. It was my favorite Syrian dessert, and I felt the urge to sneak some into my suitcase with me as my mother and I attacked the tray with guilty smiles.

"After lunch, I want us to light a candle for Grandma Marium," she said. I suddenly remembered that it was the anniversary of my maternal grandmother's death. "Then I'll give you something that I want you to pack with you for your trip."

"How much do you think I should take with me?"

"No more than two suitcases. Start with your winter clothes first and then you'll know how much room you have for other things."

That task turned out to be much easier said than done. My mother offered to help with it, but I insisted on doing it alone. I knew that it was going to be a deeply emotional and personal process, and I worried that the sight of my mother helping me one last time would make it even more painful. My body felt heavier as my hands grasped the few things from my current life that would accompany me into a loneliness I had never known. I must have packed, unpacked, and repacked each travel bag at least five times, as tears blurred my eyes with every new attempt to complete the task. The need to decide what to bring to the next phase of my life overwhelmed me, well beyond the guesswork of predicting what would be most useful in such a foreign place. How could I reduce my whole existence to two suitcases, with so little room for any tangible mementos of the place and people I was leaving behind?

I was also upset by the idea that even what I could take with me from my life in Syria would probably be discarded eventually, when I outgrew this pair of pants or wore out that shirt, or realized that some part of my wardrobe just looked too unfashionable for my new environment. An immense sadness and fear about all of the unknowns – and my impending aloneness – suddenly overpowered me, leading to a steady stream of tears wetting my face.

After nearly five hours, I was finally at peace with – or at least resigned to – my packing decisions. I told my mother that I was ready. My two suitcases were left open for her to inspect my choices.

“Is that everything?” she asked with a frown.

I nodded.

“Then you’re not done packing,” she replied. “Where is that carry-on backpack that I got you for your most important things?”

“Oh, right.” I had forgotten about that detail.

“That carry-on bag is also your backup, in case your luggage gets lost for some reason. So make sure you pack at least one warm sweater, a shirt, and two pairs of underwear and socks, along with your toiletries. And put your gloves and hat in the pockets of your coat, along with your cell phone, so that you have all of those things on you.”

This of course required some reconfiguring of prior packing decisions, all of which took almost another hour. But by 7 p.m., all of my bags were finally ready to go, with my properly stuffed winter coat resting on my backpack, which contained my laptop, cell phone charger, toiletries, and two days of backup clothes.

“You forgot something,” my mother said, this time with a loving twinkle in her eye.

“What now?” I asked.

“You have to take this with you too,” she said, opening a box and holding up a silver necklace with the Syriac cross (a crucifix with a budding flower shape on each tip) dangling from it. “My grandmother gave it to my mother, who passed it to me. Now is the right time to give it to you. Not just because you’re leaving and will need something that always connects you to your roots, but also because tonight we remember her.”

She closed the box and put it in my hand, and I suddenly felt the weight of history and the love of family resting together in my palm. Her smile flooded me with warmth as she wrapped her arms around me and gave me a hug.

She pulled away. “But don’t wear it until you have left Syria. It’s too dangerous now for that,” she warned. “Put it in your backpack.”

After I packed the cherished keepsake in my carry-on bag, she led me over to a memorial candle that we lit for her mother. As I peered into the incandescent glow of the flickering candle, I again thought of how the tiny fire on its tip, like that on the Christmas candles I’d gazed at in church, was oddly related to the flames that could consume a building and its residents after a bombing or airstrike.

About fifteen minutes later, my father arrived at our house. When we went to greet him by the door, he seemed worried. He shut and locked the front door, dropped his things on the counter, and looked for his key to open the drawer by the pharmacy cash register in the foyer.

“What’s wrong, Youssef?” my mother asked him anxiously.

“Nothing, I hope. But we have to be prepared,” he said, as he opened the drawer and took out the pistol that Firaz had bought to protect the pharmacy.

My mother’s expression turned grave and distressed. “What do you mean? What’s happening?”

“Preparing for the worst,” my father replied, trying to sound calm as he nervously stroked the whiskers of his mustache with one hand, while holding the gun with his other. “I also sent Firaz to get a few more guns and some army friends who can help.”

“Youssef, stop this mystery and tell me what’s happening,” my mother insisted in dismay.

“There is a Sunni doctor I had to fire today, after I discovered that he was purloining hospital supplies.”

“Which doctor? What’s his name?” my mother asked.

“Doctor Omar.”

“When did this happen?” she asked.

“About an hour ago.”

“And what exactly happened?” she persisted, wringing her hands.

My father started pacing around the foyer a little with the gun still in his hand. “When I confronted him with proof that he had been misappropriating hospital supplies, he admitted that he was transferring them to rebels. And then we had an argument about this.”

“What do you mean?” my mother asked, the mounting concern clear in her voice.

“I explained to him that the hospital supplies were for our patients and not for any other purpose. He then accused me of being a supporter

of the regime. I replied that I was a supporter of the hospital, and therefore couldn't allow such dishonesty among the staff, or the place would cease to function properly."

"And what did he say?"

"His reply was, 'Are you sure you want to fire me for this, when I know where you live?' I told him that threats won't change a thing and that he was indeed fired, effective immediately. But he obviously has connections to the rebels and does in fact know where I live, so we must now prepare for the worst."

My father stopped pacing, put the pistol down on a counter nearby, and took my passport out of his trouser pocket. "Are you packed?" he asked me.

"Yes," I replied.

"Good. Here is your passport and visa, and some related documents that you'll need for entry into Canada. Put this in your purse and keep it with you at all times."

"Inās, do as your father says. Go put it in your purse, by your bags."

I did as they asked and when I came back, their conversation alarmed me even more.

"She needs to leave tonight," I heard my father say as I was returning. He was pacing about the foyer again.

"What's going on?" I asked apprehensively. "Your SMS said that my flight is in two days."

"It is. But I don't want you to stay here," he snapped back, clearly on edge.

"What do you mean? So where will I stay until my flight?"

"With the neighbor behind our house, Mohammed Rajeh. I already arranged it with him by phone on my way back from the hospital."

"So I'm taking my bags there?"

"Yes, I'll take your luggage there with the car."

"Does that mean he's taking me to the airport too?"

"Yes," he said, still walking about nervously. My father's grim expression only reinforced the sinister tension I felt in the foyer.

"Why, Papa?"

He must have sensed from my voice and expression that my anxiety had – by that point – surpassed his, because he walked over to calm me. My father put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Inās, it will be fine." His reassuring voice and expression eased some of the swelling terror I had begun to feel. "There is nothing to fear with him.

He considers himself first a human, then a Syrian, and only last a Sunni Muslim.”

“But I want you and Mom to take me.”

“I know. I wish we could do it that way. But us taking you would be dangerous, even before what happened with Doctor Omar. Now, it’s impossible. You are much safer going with Mohammed. The Sunni Islamists have been taking over Homs, so I need a Sunni man I can trust to get you out of the city and to the Damascus airport.”

My mother agreed. “Your father is right, Inās. Mohammed is a member of the elite and on good terms with the regime. But his Sunni background means that the rebels are less likely to bother him.”

“He’s a good man – we’ve been friends since before you were born. And I promised him that upon your safe arrival, my brother would wire him \$3,000 for his help – just in case he encounters any risks or expenses along the way.”

“And what about you?” I asked my parents, as a foreboding feeling of guilt suddenly descended upon me.

“We are staying, Inās,” my mother said gently.

“But why don’t you try to leave before it gets any more dangerous? I’m sure Uncle Luke could make room for the two of you and Firaz.”

“He has been kind enough to take in Antoun and Maria. That is already too much to ask. I won’t be chased out of my own home. And as one of the leaders of the Christian community here, it’s not right or honorable for me to flee when danger arrives. I was born in Homs, and I will die in Homs.”

“Then I should stay here with you and Firaz, and help however I can,” I protested.

“If you want to help, then you’ll do as your father says,” my mother replied sternly, as if my resistance was only making things worse. “You will give us peace of mind, knowing that you are much safer.”

“Yes, Inās,” my father agreed, as he took my arms and urgently gripped them. I could almost feel him restraining his fingers from pressing too firmly into my skin. His unease continued to settle upon me as he searched my eyes with an intensity whose message I would remember forever. “And you can do far more for us from America than you can from here, where you’re just another defenseless Christian. So if you really want to help, Inās, then you’ll go to the very best school you can get into and earn the best grades you can. And, God willing, I’ll be able to send you more money by the time you use up what is waiting for

you. But take loans if you have to. Work if you must. Whatever happens, don't let anything limit you. And as you rise to the top, guard your values and your purity, and remember your roots and your people – do what you can to help. And I have no doubt that you will. Now come here and give me a big hug before I take you and your bags to Mohammed.”

“OK, I understand,” I conceded reluctantly but solemnly, as the power of his words seared themselves into my core and I gave him a hug.

Moments later, Roy came running up to me, wagging his tail, moving his head, and then running towards the front door, the way he always does when he wants me to let him outside so that he can do his business. It was as if he knew that this was our last time together.

“I'll do it,” my father said.

“Dad, I'm packed and ready to go – let me just take him out one last time.”

My father looked as if he was about to insist that he take the dog out, but then his cell phone rang.

As he went to answer it, I grabbed my winter coat and started towards the door, where Roy was waiting, wagging his tail expectantly.

I could hear my father talking on the phone. “Firaz, there isn't much time, so if you have only one armed guard who can come, then bring him now. We can try to get more tomorrow. And make sure you have a good gun for yourself – the one here is too small. I don't – ”

That was the last thing I heard from his conversation after shutting the front door and stepping out into the chilly night with Roy. I really didn't want to hear any more. I was already overwhelmed by a thousand thoughts and fears.

For now, that is all that I can tell you about the last time that I ever saw my parents. I just don't have the emotional stamina or fortitude to go into more detail. All I can say is that in the end, there was no car ride to transfer the two large suitcases I had packed with so much tortured deliberation and emotion. I had to get to Mohammed alone, and had the strength to carry only my backpack.

## Chapter 4: Anissa

∞ Monday, February 10, 2014 ∞

To My Dearest,

I've been avoiding this moment for about two years, but it's time. Today I spoke with my therapist (Monique – I'll get to her soon) and she told me that I'm ready to share this with you. Or at least ready to try.

I'm actually afraid to write to you now because I know what kind of emotional torment awaits me. But Monique says it's the only way forward. I need to face the ogre head on, and come to terms with it in a safe place, and you are that safe place, My Dearest. So here we go. Please hold my trembling hand as we descend into the ghastly darkness together, because the horror we will visit slithers where no beating heart should go. For the evil that we shall witness there is a shame to all of humanity. Yet – just as a peaceful candle still belongs to the family of energy that can burn down a building full of people – the monsters who did this are still somehow part of the human race.

So let's go back to the night of January 18, 2012, after my father made his emotional appeal and I reluctantly accepted his plan to have our neighbor Mohammed take me to the airport.

I asked my father to let me take out the dog one last time and managed to avoid his objection only because my older brother called him on his cell phone at that moment. I soon heard my father anxiously urging him to come as fast as he could with the armed guard and a gun for himself.

I put on my winter coat and joined Roy by the front door, where he was waiting, wagging his tail impatiently. I stepped out into the cold night and took our German shepherd around to the side of our townhouse, towards the backyard, so that he could finish his business.

A few minutes later, his head suddenly jerked to one side, and he emitted a brief snarl before barking wildly and running towards the gate separating our lawn from the street. I ran after him, my heart pounding with fear at what I might find. When I got to the front yard area, I saw armed men with beards in a Toyota pickup truck – one getting out of the driver's seat, two standing on the hood of the vehicle to step onto the top of our nine-foot metal fence, and two more behind them on the vehicle bed, waiting to do the same.

I screamed in terror as Roy ran right up to the fence, barking ferociously at the bearded men who were preparing to jump down into our yard. The first man jumped and, before he could even reach the ground, Roy had already leapt and buried his teeth into the intruder's calf as he landed onto our lawn. The man groaned in pain as our dog clenched his jaws while growling viciously. Moments later, the other man landed next to him and our dog released the first man and moved to attack the second one. But a gunshot blasted through the winter night and Roy's growls suddenly grew silent. The second man lowered his gun a little. Roy yelped for a moment and then just lay there. Meanwhile, the three other armed men were making their way over the fence and into our front yard, which was when the front door to my house opened and I saw my father enter the chilly night, with a pistol raised and firing. He shot two or three times and hit the second man who killed Roy. The bullet apparently penetrated his waist, causing him to drop to the floor. But one of the three other men shot my father. I heard the thud of the bullet's impact and saw my father wobble just slightly, staggering slowly to the ground. I screamed in horror and ran over to him.

I saw that he was hit in his right shoulder and his gun had fallen from his hand and was on the ground nearby. I almost reached for the gun but stopped myself. I had never used one before so – rather than risk a bad shot that goaded the attackers into a more aggressive response – I tried to pull my father towards the entrance to the house, just steps away. Threading my arms underneath his, I attempted to lift him. But his concrete-heavy frame and weight thwarted my efforts. My failure to move him out of harm's way devastated me even more when he yelled, "Go without me!" But as I stood up to turn and make a run for it, one of the armed men yelled, "Stop!" I froze, realizing that it was too late. Three bearded men stood around my father and me with their Kalashnikov rifles up and ready to mow us down in an instant.

I heard my mother's scared voice from the doorway behind me. "Please," she said in a desperately pleading voice. "Please... My husband meant no harm... He just heard the dog bark and our daughter scream... He reacted to an intruder the way anyone would. He meant you no harm. Please put your weapons down. We can give you medical supplies. Drugs from our pharmacy for your fighters. Whatever you want. Our pharmacy serves every person of every faith."

One of the three men standing in front of us replied. "We can discuss it inside," he said, his words emitting steam in the cold night air.

He gestured to the other two and they grabbed my wounded father under his armpits, lifted him off the floor, and dragged him up the few stairs and into our house. I saw the two men who were injured in the exchange and still by the fence on the ground, slowly getting up and making their way towards me, apparently following their leader into our house. I followed the men who were dragging my father, and I could feel myself shaking and hyperventilating in fear as I entered our house. The two injured men followed me and then shut the door behind them.

My mother frantically unlocked a cabinet and started taking drugs and medicines out for display. "Here. We have so many medicines. Just tell me what you need and it's yours," she said, her voice pathetically unsteady.

"That's not necessary," said one of the armed men. "We don't need you to give these to us because this is now our pharmacy."

His leader corrected him: "No, first we give them a choice." He stroked his beard for a moment, as if he was weighing a proposal in his mind. "If they choose wisely, we don't need to take anything because they are then one of us." He looked at my father, who was sitting up in a chair with two men holding Kalashnikovs standing behind him, and Marisol pressing a towel against his shoulder, trying to stem the bleeding. "As the man of the house, the choice is yours to make," he continued.

"What choice?" my father asked in a voice strained by the pain of his wound.

"You can renounce your faith and convert to Islam, and then you are one of us. Or you can remain a Christian dog, and you will share the fate of your dog outside. He was Christian too, right?"

The other four men snickered and laughed at their leader's joke about Roy.

"Choose wisely, Doctor. Because if you choose to stay a Christian dog, then you are not only an infidel who will get the sword. But you will get special punishment for serving the regime."

"I don't serve the regime. I serve the people of Homs. I help any patient who comes into the hospital – every religion and every political orientation."

"You don't allow Doctor Omar to give us medical supplies, so you are serving the regime, and I should just kill you now for that. But Allah is merciful and has given you the option to live by serving Islam. If you wish to accept His mercy, simply recite the Shahada and your life will be

spared. The words are easy to say: There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

“Yes, I know these words. They are the first of the five pillars of Sunni Islam. But I am not Muslim. I am a Christian, and I believe in Jesus Christ.”

“You are a brave man. It would be a shame not to have you helping the resistance against the infidel regime.” He took out a cigarette and lit it.

“I condemn all atrocities against innocent Sunnis, including those committed by the *shabiba*. And when Sunni victims come to my hospital, I treat them to the best of my ability. I am a human being and a doctor before I am a Syrian. And I am a Syrian before I am a Christian.”

“If you become a Muslim, you can continue to work as a doctor for Muslims fighting in the resistance.”

“When a bleeding man comes to the hospital, I ask which wounds to suture – not what God he prays to, or whose war he fights. And when a pregnant woman arrives, I ask whether a natural birth or a C-section is preferable, not who her prophet is.”

“By embracing Islam, you save your life now, and will heal holy warriors fighting jihad.”

“I am a Christian. And as a doctor, I heal everyone. And nothing you can do will change that.”

“So you have made your choice and you will die tonight,” he replied, resting his cigarette on a piece of furniture nearby. “But first – because you fired Doctor Omar and cut off our medical supplies – we have a special treat for you. Ahmad has fought bravely against infidels in recent weeks and deserves a reward. Especially because he has been looking for a wife.”

The two men standing behind my father and Marisol took the Kalashnikovs they were holding and hung them from their shoulders using the strap, so that their hands were now free. They each took out combat knives. One put his blade to my father’s throat, and the other started to walk towards me.

“So Ahmad will take your daughter now as his wife and Osama will make sure that you are a witness to this act. Then, if he wants to keep your daughter as his wife and she embraces Islam, then her life will be spared. Otherwise, she will share your fate. The same for your housekeeper and your wife – Osama will choose which one he wants as his wife. But we start with your daughter.”

My father and mother screamed out in horror as Ahmad rushed closer, grabbed me, and threw me down on to the nearby sofa. Hovering above me with his knife, he said, “Pull down your pants, or I’ll cut them off.” Whimpering in terror, I struggled to comply with his command, somewhat constrained by the winter coat that was still on me. Trembling with fear, I willed my fingers to settle on the waistband of my pants, yet fought their movement simultaneously. Thoughts of what I was about to experience had seized my ability to cooperate any further. I froze up. Furious at my noncompliance, Ahmad’s eyes flared with an anger that terrorized me even more. Then, a noise I will never forget, sounded – the loud bang of a gunshot pierced the icy, dread-filled night and shocked me to my core. What followed was the unbearable weight of my attacker, crushing my chest as he collapsed on top of me, blood from the wound to his skull splattering all over my face. His weight rested on me and I couldn’t endure his imprisonment any longer. I pushed the satanic thing off of me, finding that Firaz had arrived with a security guard.

A shootout ensued and part of me felt too resigned to fate to move – almost as if a preordained defeat had left me stuck to the sofa, waiting to die from a bullet or a knife-wielding Islamist. But then the impassioned words spoken by my father not even an hour ago bellowed through my mind: “...you can do far more for us from America than you can from here, where you’re just another defenseless Christian.”

I had to survive this nightmare, I told myself. I somehow had to make a difference, from a position of power and strength – not like this. I realized that I had to flee, however I could, in whatever minutes of fighting remained. I dropped to the floor, getting on my hands and knees to stay below the gunfire, as I scrambled further into our house, until I reached the corner, where I turned left towards the stairs. With the sound of fighting and shots still raging on the other side of the wall now protecting me, I stood and sprinted up the stairs as fast as I could to my room, until I reached my bags. Trying to ensure that nothing got lost in my frenzied escape, I stopped to zip my purse shut, sling it across my chest over my coat, and then put my backpack on.

In a breathless panic, I ran back down the stairs while praying to God that none of the attackers had moved deeper into the house. When I reached the bottom step, a temporary and uneasy relief washed over me as I found no intruders there. I turned left to move towards the doorway leading to the backyard. Just as I was about to leave the area

and make my escape, I heard an intense volley of gunfire and several different voices yelling “Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!” I shuddered profusely, horrified at the thought of what must have just happened as I flew through the backdoor, sprinting as fast as I could to the six-foot fence separating Mohammed’s yard from our own.

Antoun and I had climbed it many times to fetch his football, but a moment of doubt emerged when I realized that I had never tried to do so with my backpack, purse, and winter coat on me. But then my father’s powerful words returned to me, and scaling the fence while encumbered suddenly seemed like a small feat. Nothing would stop me. I would climb that fence, and I would survive this nightmare.

I banged on my neighbor’s door until it opened just slightly, revealing an armed man with a concerned look, as he assessed my identity for a moment. He ushered me inside, shutting and locking the door behind me. As he led me through the house to the living room, I used my sleeve to wipe the blood off my face.

Moments later, Mohammed arrived looking distraught. “Inās, I’m so sorry I couldn’t do more to help. Samir and I together have just two guns and only he is skilled at using one. If we went in to help, we could have easily been killed there or targeted here the day after, and then I couldn’t possibly keep my promise to your father to take you to the airport in two days.”

I stood there silently, shocked by the events that had just transpired, and trying not to faint from hyperventilation.

“Please forgive me, Inās. As soon as I heard gunshots, I called my regime contacts to the Syrian Army.”

I couldn’t get my mouth to say anything. It felt totally paralyzed, with my heart racing at a thousand beats per minute. As I tried to catch my breath, Mohammed’s wife and his housekeeper arrived. In keeping with Muslim tradition, both women appeared wearing hijabs, in case their unexpected guest turned out to be a man. When they saw that I was a female, they removed their headscarves.

“They said they would try to send some troops but were stretched thin at the moment, with so many battles engaging the army tonight,” Mohammed explained, continuing with his apology.

“It’s too late anyway,” I finally said, between breaths.

“What do you mean?”

“As I was escaping, I heard many gunshots,” I responded, stopping for more breath. “And then shouts of Allahu Akbar!”

Repeating those words, I finally broke down in tears.

“I’m so sorry, Inās. So sorry.” His voice was full of grief and remorse. His wife came up to me and gently put her hand on my shoulder. “You are safe now, Inās,” she said, before holding me in a protective hug.

“Yes, you are safe now, Inās,” Mohammed added sadly for emphasis. “But you must not leave the house or stay by the windows for the next two days – until we leave for your flight,” he warned me. “It’s for your security, just in case.”

I was crying hysterically in his wife’s arms until she stepped away and looked at me in alarm. “You’re bleeding, poor child!”

She turned to their housekeeper and instructed her to retrieve the first-aid kit. She turned to me and gently placed her hand on my arm. “Come, let’s clean you up, and bandage your wounds.”

I put down my purse and they helped me remove my backpack and blood-stained coat.

“Tomorrow, we will get you some new clothes and a new coat, so that you can go to the airport with clean and proper clothes.”

“No,” I protested between tears. “These are the only clothes from home that I’m taking with me. My only memories.”

“OK, dear – not to worry,” his wife said calmly and reassuringly. “We’ll wash them out for you. My daughter maybe has some extra shirts that will fit you, just in case you want to take them.”

They were so attentive, generous, and kind. They offered to get me a new suitcase full of whatever clothing might fit from their household, and anything else they might be able to find in the day and a half left before my flight, in a war-battered city with few shopping options. But I turned down their offer. If I really was leaving everything behind and starting new, then my clothes might as well be clothes that I picked – not those from another mother who wasn’t just murdered.

That night I couldn’t sleep at all. The physical pain from my wounds, the emotional trauma of so many horrors in so short a time, and the lingering fear that at any moment, the barbarians just across the backyard from where I was sleeping might suddenly decide to attack Mohammed’s house made it impossible for me to close my eyes. I had no way to know if anyone had seen me climbing the fence, and kept imagining the worst-case scenario.

The next day, I spent hours checking all of the usual Twitter and Facebook accounts of local activists, reporters, and neighbors for any

more news about what had happened the previous night. It wasn't safe to leave Mohammed's house and calling someone nearby to inquire had its own risks and awkwardness. So checking online was the best option.

Sure enough, that afternoon, I came across the frozen frame of a YouTube link that was an image of what used to be my home. Bracing myself for the worst, I clicked on it – only for the chance to have some closure and learn whatever more could be known about the fate of my parents, my older brother, and Marisol. Like so many other awful videos from the civil war, this one was clearly taken on someone's phone and had that jumpy, grainy, amateur feel to it.

As the footage began to play on my laptop screen, the sound of the cameraman's sadistic glee as he spoke had me fighting the bile that threatened to rise from my stomach. The façade of our home came into view before the camera panned to where my dead dog lay on the front lawn. I swallowed heavily but forced myself to keep watching. I had to. I had to know.

The camera then focused on a bearded man who was laughing and playing with my younger brother's football. The video then panned the yard, stopping and capturing the front door to our house. "Welcome to the Islamic pharmacy center and hotel of Homs!" he announced with a chuckle as he stepped inside, filming the aftermath of the fight that had taken place. There were various cabinets and drawers ajar, most of them empty. Bottles of pills, medications, and other pharmacy materials were scattered about everywhere. Seeing the aftermath on video felt like blades in my chest, as I imagined the struggles that must have caused such destruction.

A voice from afar called out. "Come back here, you didn't show the best part of all."

"Oh, yes! I filmed the Christian dog but forgot to show the retired staff from the hotel and pharmacy," the cameraman replied, with a sickening tone full of delighted sarcasm. He then walked outside where another man added to their evil mockery. "Show them the real Christian dogs," he laughed. "So they know what happens to those who support the infidel regime of Bashar."

My breathing became labored and heat slowly swept across my face. I didn't want to see what they planned to show, for I knew it would be nothing less than the most hideous evil, and I could feel myself about to vomit. But I couldn't bring myself to turn the video off. I had escaped and my family hadn't. I owed it to them at least to find the strength to witness their fate.