

Harem Slave

One Thousand Nine Hundred and Four Days of Hell
on the Persian Gulf

A Novel

By
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“Sudden thought. A guy could kidnap a number of good-looking women, put them on a ship bound for who knows where, and sell them to some sultan. You could get away with it!”

- Serial killer Kemper, as quoted in *Newsweek*

When everything else fails, try love.

This book is dedicated to Marisa, Nenzima, and all the other girls
who are sucked into this terrifying vortex and do not survive.

PART ONE KIDNAPPED

July-August 2005
(Jumada Al-Thany – Rajab 1425)

Even before the pale glimmer in the back of her mind warned her that consciousness was drawing near, Tammy knew something was terribly wrong. She was fearful of waking up, uneasy about leaving the safety of oblivion. The world had a sinister feel to it. A sinister smell.

She drifted reluctantly toward wakefulness. The nauseating odor of hot diesel fuel. Muffled voices, strange and ominous. The world heaved and swayed. She was dizzy. Falling. She reached out to steady herself.

Oh God, she thought, what's the matter? Why can't I move my arms? Cautiously, furtively, she opened her eyes.

"No-Tits is coming to!" a voice beside her trumpeted in accented French. "We can party now."

"Calm down, calm down, will you, Kamal? Is that all you ever think about?"

She was lying naked on the rusty metal floor of a boat cabin, tied hand and foot. She stared, disbelieving the scene around her. Three men, two in caftans and one in khaki, were standing amid a dozen or so other bound and naked women sprawled unconscious on the rough cabin floor. She shivered. Felt a surge of nausea.

"She's throwing up!" Kamal said excitedly.

Vomit dribbled onto the floor, around and under her. She wanted to lift her hand to wipe it away. She couldn't. She wanted to get out of the way of the putrid mess. She couldn't. Nor could she escape the lecherous gaze of the three men.

You're completely helpless, little demons in her brain screamed. *These are evil men, and they can't wait to hurt you.* A deep elemental fear rose bitter in her throat.

"No tits at all, but just look at that ass," Kamal said. "The men at the club will be standing in line." He grabbed a handful of flesh and kneaded it roughly. The skin he touched burned as if it had been brushed with acid.

"We've got some expensive pieces in this shipment and you're not to mess with them, especially the Swede and the two little ones. Off limits. You hear me, Kamal? I say, off limits."

"Don't worry, Fuad, I'll be careful. Besides, if there's an accident, your brother can always turn them back into virgins."

"You bastard! Don't even think about it!"

"Look, she's wide awake now, Fuad, just look. I'll start breaking her in." It was the man in khaki. Tammy looked closer. A customs officer!

"No, Jean-Paul, that piece is mine. Pick out another one."

“Ah, this job does have great benefits,” Kamal said, surveying the scene on the floor and smacking his lips. “Look at the tits on this piece over here. Why don’t we keep her around and put her through with the next shipment?”

“Not this time. She’s a special order, and the old man’s fuse is already short because he’s waited so long. He seems to think you can pull Swedish pieces with a front porch like that out of stock as readily as fucking Ethiopians or Vietnamese.”

“Can’t wait ‘til Big-Tits wakes up,” Kamal said, eyeing a stunningly beautiful platinum blonde.

“Well,” said Fuad, “time to launch No-Tits on her new career. Help me get her ready for Lesson One, will you, Kamal?”

Fuad produced a knife with a curved blade. Smiling, he held it under Tammy’s chin as Kamal untied her, after which they dragged her to a filthy lower berth and strapped her down. She watched Fuad’s grinning face in horror as he pricked the underside of her chin. He rubbed the wound with a finger, and then lifted it, dripping with blood, to his mouth. Eyeing her with the chill smugness of a hyena circling a crippled fawn, he again licked his bloody finger and smirked.

Jean-Paul and Kamal left, banging the cabin door behind them. Fuad started to undress. She lay immobilized in the semi-darkness, cold terror gripping her tighter than the straps that held her down. *They’re going to hurt you*, the demons cackled, *and there’s not a thing you can do about it*. She was blanketed in perspiration. So this was what it was like to be abused by a gang of practiced sadists. It had to be happening to someone else.

Fuad hung his caftan on a hook and started undoing his trousers.

She was momentarily distracted by a small movement close to her. Something scurried over one leg, then the other. A moment later in the dim light a torpedo-shaped form headed across the cabin, scrambling over unconscious women as it ran. A rat! The seams came apart in her head.

If there’s one rat there must be more, the demons pointed out. *This filthy boat is crawling with them*.

Fuad was ready now. She shrank back, furious at the straps, consumed by strangling terror, eyes locked on his blood-engorged weapon. There was no escape. Dear God, she prayed, please help me get through this, please please please.

She felt the weight of his sweating body as he heaved himself upon her. She closed her eyes and tried to separate herself from what was going on. This isn’t me, she told herself, this is some other unfortunate victim. She almost succeeded blocking out how he ran his hands up and down her length, probed her, spread her open, made a few tentative forays. Then she realized where he was aiming.

Oh no, not back there, she wanted to say. All that came out was a feeble whimper.

He plunged. White-hot pain ripped through her, enveloped her, and would not let her go. She found her voice and screamed. She found her strength and fought. It was just what he wanted. The more Tammy tried to twist away from him, the more he grunted with pleasure; the more she sought to writhe out from under the punishing onslaught, the harder he struck. Warm blood trickled down her thigh. She ran out of screams. She choked on hot unshed tears. Still he dug himself into her. When the world was nothing but a blur of dizzying pain he fell upon her, shuddering in satisfaction.

She lay spent and exhausted, like a discarded glove run over by a train, awash in pain and humiliation, defiled, ruined. At least, she con-soled herself, it was finally over.

“Say thank you,” he ordered.

Tammy heard the words, but they were addressed to that poor broken stranger on the vinyl mattress, not to her.

“Say thank you!”

Her body hurt. Her brain hurt. Half-formed thoughts dissolved into murky nothingness.

“Listen, bitch!” He gave her a pair of powerful slaps. “I told you to thank me!”

Comprehension and outrage found her at the same instant. Thank the brute? She spat at him with her eyes.

“Stubborn bitch,” he said with chilling laughter. “Just a little taste of your life as a whore. Now, wasn’t that fun?” He unstrapped her, dumped her onto the floor, and tied her obscenely to a pole. It took more will power than she thought she owned, but she managed to hold back her tears. That scrap of dignity, at least, she was determined to maintain.

She defiantly stared past him.

“Wasn’t it?”

She recoiled as he kicked her repeatedly.

She waited until he shut the door before she disintegrated into a spineless mass of despair. “He did it back there,” she told the beautiful Swede next to her. “Oh God, it hurts.”

“You’re bleeding much, Tam,” said the Swede.

“He – he wanted me to thank him,” she said between sobs. “I wouldn’t, so he beat me with a hose.” Her rear was on fire, and her back a mass of deep, thick pain.

A little while later, Fuad and Jean-Paul lifted the Swede onto the berth and strapped her in place. As hard as she tried, Tammy couldn’t shut out the groans, the pleas for mercy, the sound of flesh pounding flesh. At length Jean-Paul had his fill, and to make room for Kamal’s victim he dragged her onto the floor and tied her, sobbing and gasping for breath, to the pole. She lay heavily against the back of Tammy’s arm, smelling of sweat and blood.

The Swede wept quietly. “I don’t want to be locked away in the harem of some old man,” she said through ragged sobs. “I’m scared. I’m much scared.”

“Don’t worry,” Tammy said, as much to herself as to her com-panion. “Someone must be looking for us. There’s no way they’ll get away with this. My dad used to work at the State Department, and he’ll know just what to do.”

A big-boned German with platinum blonde hair let loose obscenities every time one of the crew appeared. She cursed them while they tormented her; she cursed them while they tormented the others.

“Can I gag her?” Kamal asked. “I’m sick of listening to that shit.”

“Gag? You’re with the big boys now,” Fuad said derisively. “Just take this foam and squirt it into her mouth. Works great. Don’t put in too much, though, or it’ll block the air passages.”

“Insulation foam? Isn’t it toxic?”

Fuad shrugged.

There was a mild scuffle. The German was silenced. The Swede and Tammy looked at each other and shuddered.

“No-Tits,” he kept saying to Tammy, “Where you’re going you’ll be fucked fourteen, sixteen hours a day and they’ll grade you on your enthusiasm. Better learn how to show some gratitude.”

Tammy and the Swede – a buxom and meltingly beautiful sixteen-year-old from Goteborg named Marisa Björklund – whispered to each other when the men weren’t around. Marisa had answered an ad for a swimsuit model, and, like Tammy, had been overpowered in the dress-ing room.

“How are you staying so calm?” Marisa asked her. “I am trying not to cry but I always do.”

“I never knew how stubborn hatred could make me.”

“Too sore to move, are you, No-Tits?” said Fuad, giving Tammy another kick in the ribs.

“Will the whorehouse take her with her back all covered in bruises like that?”

“By the time she’s been trained, she’ll be fine. Done this before. I’m going to let the old man know that his special order is finally on the way.”

“Let’s go play with Big Boobs some more,” Kamal suggested to the one the girls called Skinny Pimples. They dragged Marisa out on a leash, and hooted while they made her move around on her knees and jump up and down. Boisterous cries and the frequent whack of a paddle mixed with plaintive sobs.

Fuad suddenly appeared on deck. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he bellowed.

Abruptly the festivities stopped.

Mumbled explanations; shouted accusations. A moment later a very frustrated Skinny Pimples was dragging Marisa, weeping pitifully, back to the cabin. He swore under his breath when she got caught on the bulkhead separating the cabin from the deck. He yanked on the leash. That still didn’t get her over the hump, so he yanked again. Marisa screamed.

“Stop making such a goddam fuss!” he yelled. He found the foam, and Marisa fell silent.

A few minutes later, Tammy glanced at Marisa, whose face had turned blue. Before long, she had grown pale. Deathly pale. Tammy felt her sanity leaking away as the beautiful corpse beside her went from pink to grayish white and from warm to cold. She resented more than ever the ropes that held her wrists behind her back. The animals, she thought hotly, I can’t even close Marisa’s eyes.

An hour or so later Jean-Paul blew into the cabin, followed by Skinny Pimples and Banana Man, who always acted extra-tough when Fuad or Jean-Paul was around. “Time to get everybody crated back up and ready for the canal,” Jean-Paul ordered. “That fucking customs officer is starting to get too fucking nosy.” Skinny Pimples trussed the women up more securely than usual and Banana Man gave them all shots. When they got to Marisa, Jean-Paul touched her. “She’s dead,” he said incredulously, turning on Skinny Pimples, “already cold. What the hell did you do to her? A hundred-thousand-dollar piece!”

“Dead? But how can that be? When I left, she was still bawling her brains out. So I used that foam to make her shut the hell up.”

“Well, you overdid it, you imbecile, and you smothered her. *Merde!* Where the hell are we going to get another fucking Swede like that to fill that order?”

They dragged the body out, tied an old anchor to it, and threw it overboard, while Jean-Paul continued to scream at Skinny Pimples.

As she lay there in the semi-darkness, Tammy forced herself to go over every detail of her abduction. She'd need to describe all the circumstances to the police when they rescued her and arrested these brutes.

Tammy had awakened to sounds of crockery in the kitchen and the aroma of fresh-ground coffee. She could have stayed in that carved antique bed forever, the diffused sunlight transforming the blue-dotted bedclothes into a wildflower meadow. But she slid on her jeans and tee-shirt and clomped down the old wooden stairs to find Clotilde, as usual, at the stove, nursing a *fond de sauce* and buzzing gourmet Cameroonian Arabica in the coffee grinder.

"Did you sleep well, Tam?" Clotilde inquired, flashing a smile, as she added chopped leeks to the stock pot.

How could anyone not sleep well, Tammy wondered, in such a fine old house, surrounded by almond trees and climbing roses?

"*Mais oui*," she said, "anything I can do to help?"

"Just relax. Everything's ready. I want you to eat a good breakfast this morning," Clotilde instructed, in the tone of voice she used to effectively eliminate all opposition. "You're as tall and skinny as an asparagus. To be healthy you should gain at least five kilos. Now, would you like to help me make that *mousse au chocolat*?"

Five kilos? Eleven pounds! At the rate she was going, in the six weeks she had left she'd need a whole new wardrobe before she could fly back to Washington. Oh well, she rationalized, sinking her teeth into another slice of brioche spread thickly with Normandy butter and homemade huckleberry jam, this is my high-school graduation treat, my vacation.

Pierre wiped his mouth and looked at his watch. "We need to be leaving, Tam."

"Oh, that's right. Today's the day you see your banker. How do things look?"

He made a face and shrugged. "It is hard, a small business like mine. One of my major clients just filed bankruptcy, and it's left me in big trouble. Ready?"

She took Clo's marketing list, tickled toddler Rose-Marie good-bye, shook five-year-old Philippe's hand importantly, and climbed into the beige Peugeot.

"Get the watercress instead of the *frisée* if it looks better," Clotilde called from the kitchen door.

"I'd like to poke around the Arab Quarter a little," Tammy said as Pierre started the engine. "I noticed some really nice brassware there the other day and I'd like to get a few things for my friends."

Pierre darkened. "Be careful," he said. "Those places don't have a very good reputation."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh," he said, trying too hard, she noticed, to sound nonchalant. "You hear stories. About girls, you know, uh, who vanish. You're young and blonde and pretty. Be careful, that's all."

“I’m sensible.”

“I know. Otherwise I wouldn’t let you go anywhere near there.”

“I want to go to a bicycle shop today too, maybe, to pick out an outfit for Marc, something *très français*.”

“He certainly is handsome. Are you two serious?”

“Pierre! I’m only eighteen! I start college in the fall, and he still has three more years at the Naval Academy. We’ll see. But not yet.”

They rode in silence through the Provence countryside past olive trees and bougainvilleas. The sun played peek-a-boo behind thick clouds, and the scattered stone houses soon gave way to urban sprawl as they entered the ancient port city of Marseilles.

“Tam, don’t let them lure you into a basement, no matter what they say is down there. And don’t ever, ever let the shopkeeper get between you and the door.”

“Don’t worry.”

“I’ll pick you up on that corner, in front of the pharmacy, at noon. Now do be careful.”

“I’ll be fine. And hey, good luck with the bank.”

He smiled wanly. And with a wave of his hand the Peugeot sped out of sight.

She tested the heft of the tomatoes and sniffed the cantaloupes just the way Clotilde had shown her, and was rewarded by approving glances. She chatted easily with them almost as if she’d shopped in French all her life.

By the time she’d scratched out every item on the list but the turnips and the veal kidneys – she’d postpone those for as long as possible – more than an hour had gone by. She snacked on some cherries, bought a magazine, and stopped at a sidewalk café for another huge bowl of café au lait. She sauntered over to a row of shops on the edge of the Arab Quarter. Twenty past eleven. Forty minutes to kill.

“*Bonjour, mademoiselle,*” said a caftaned shopkeeper. “I have more slippers inside, many more beautiful things.” He held out his hand and showed her his establishment.

She made a quick survey. No basement; the shop was no bigger than her bedroom in Bethesda. Embroidered caftans were hanging from the ceiling, backless slippers stacked on the floor, brassware heaped on the counters.

“Gifts for your family in Denmark?” The vendor was tall and thin, with jack-o’-lantern teeth.

“No, for my family in America.” He was the third person that morning who’d thought she was Scandinavian. She was surprised. Her grandfather was born near Rotterdam, and she’d always thought she looked typically Dutch.

“Ah, American.” A calculating look.

Oh brother, she thought, I bet now he’s busy doubling all his prices in my honor.

“Here is beautiful bell from my own village. You know Algeria?”

He sized her up as the bell tinkled in his hand. What did he think, that she was going to walk out with half his stock? “No,” she replied, “but I lived in Morocco when I was little.” She wasn’t crazy about the bell; besides, her father had one almost like it.

“Here. I have caftans from Morocco. This one, pure silk. *Magnifique.*”

It was dazzling, a pale blue-and-aqua swirled design lavishly embroidered with silver. The front was rowed with tiny hand-crocheted silver buttons.

“It is beautiful with your eyes, your hair,” he went on. “Beautiful.”

It was also very expensive. “It’s nice.” She resolutely put it aside. The money she had with her was for Marc’s cycling outfit.

“Here is beautiful serving tray for monsieur. You say, ‘My dear, here is my heart,’ and no man can resist you.” He struck such a dramatic pose she had to laugh. “Monsieur is with you?”

“No, he’s back in Washington.”

“What? A beautiful lady like you? Alone? So far? *Mais non*, I do not understand this American way.”

“I’m not alone,” she hastened to tell him, remembering Pierre’s caution. “A friend will be back to pick me up in five minutes.” She wasn’t worried, but there was no point in inviting trouble.

“Beautiful caftan, mademoiselle, so beautiful. Just try on?” That jack-o’-lantern smile again. That capitalistic sparkle in his eye.

“Oh, no thank you, I really shouldn’t.”

“You are in hurry? No time? Just try.”

Eleven-thirty five. There was still time. “I just...”

“If you no like, no problem. Or come tomorrow, I keep for you. Just try.”

Why not, she thought. This is my vacation, What harm is there in just trying something on? “*Pourquoi pas?*” she said at last. Mindful of Pierre’s warnings, she added cunningly, “Where are the stairs down to the dressing room?”

“Oh, no stairs, mademoiselle, dressing room is right here.” It wasn’t just a flimsy curtain strung from a rod, but a full-length door that could close. Safe enough.

She was surprised how dark the dressing room was, and how it positively reeked of sour sweat. “Where’s the light?” she called out, groping around the rough-sawn wall. Her fingers closed on something soft and warm. It moved.

Her mind grabbed for the door handle. Suddenly, she turned. Hot breath on her face. Time stood still. Cut off. Tried to scream. Hand over her mouth. Sank her teeth into a finger. A crack. Stinging pain shot through her jaw. Raked a face with her nails. Kicked high, blind hope. Heard a gasp, hand dropped off her mouth. Her own scream. Her ankle, caught in a steely grip, twisted under her. She buckled. On her knees, arms pinned behind her back. She winced. Two men, two! A knee dug into her back. On the floor. Down.

First her wrists, then her ankles and knees, were tightly bound. She was blindfolded and her mouth taped shut. Her head pounded. Trapped. The cold sharp sting of a needle in her hip. Dragged. A heated argument. A key turning in a lock. An overpowering sense of doom.

Oh no, Tammy thought, as she recognized that she was coming to, I don't want to wake up. If I'm awake they'll kill me. She could sense someone lurking nearby. Fuad! The brothel! She had to get *away*.

"*Ya Allah!* God! Don't struggle so, my golden treasure, your IV will – oh, too late," said a soothing baritone. "Now, tell me please, where will I ever, ever find another vein?"

She blinked. Stared. Sheets, clean and white. Soft pillows. A man in white with a thousand-watt smile. Thick dark hair. Thick dark moustache. A stethoscope. A hospital! She wasn't in a brothel, she was in a hospital! She was going to be all right. Tears that she'd bottled up for days soaked the pillow.

"I'm Dr. Hassan," said the man beside her, a dizzying cross between Omar Sharif and Clark Gable. "Alas, that is my fate, to be considered frightening by beautiful women. You're dehydrated and weak, and your rectal walls are ruptured, and your back is nothing but bruises, but you'll soon be as good as new."

"I'm sorry," she said sheepishly between sobs, "I thought you were...someone else. I'm Tam, Tamara Simmons."

"Taamm? It means complete, or perfect. Which you soon will be again."

A dozen tissues later, Dr. Hassan was still there, still smiling, still reassuring. He gave her his card, Arabic on one side and English on the other. The Emirate of Amalia Jirahiya? She'd never heard of it. His devilish wink set her heart racing. "If God wills it, my golden one, in a couple of weeks you'll be able to travel."

"A couple of weeks! But I need to get back to France. My family and friends must be worried out of their minds. I need to let them know I'm all right."

"Tomorrow I need to operate and you're not going anywhere until you've sufficiently recovered. Meanwhile, give me your family's and friends' emails and I will send them messages. Now, I'll give you a shot so you can get some rest."

Over the next few days, pleasantly drugged, she drifted in and out of a misty netherworld. Once, after a vivid nightmare, she woke up screaming. A smiling male nurse in a white uniform held her hand and gave her pain-killing shots. She was grateful, because both arms were sore from the IVs, her back knotted with pain when she breathed too hard, her rear was still on fire, and her legs felt like she'd done a thousand knee-bends.

She thought her heart would explode with gratitude the day Dr. Hassan arrived with two suitcases crammed with designer clothes and a ticket to Marseilles. "Your embassy people certainly are complicated," he said, shaking his head, "Phone calls, verifications, more phone calls, oh my." He triumphantly held up a replacement passport. "You'll be leaving on the twenty-ninth of Jumada Al-Akhir, if God wills it." He waved off her protests that he was doing too much, too much by far. "You are our guest," he explained, "and we are honored to assist you."

"I'm so lucky to be alive," Tammy told Dr. Hassan again and again, letting the story about Marisa tumble onto his sympathetic ears.

"May Allah be praised. Once a year, during the month of Shaban, the Tree of Life drops the leaves of those who will die in the coming year. I grieve for your friend as you do, Taamm. But I rejoice that the Tree of Life still holds fast to your leaf and that Almighty God has seen fit to spare you."

She was cheered when huge arrangements of flowers from the Couillacs and her parents soon turned the bare hospital room into a fragrant, colorful bower.

“Nothing from my boyfriend?” she asked Dr. Hassan. “Just wait ‘til I get back to Washington. Will Marc ever hear about this!”

The following day two dozen roses arrived with a card that said, “Dearest Tam, all my love, Marc.”

“That’s odd,” she told Nurse Nessim, “maybe I’m getting all worked up over nothing, but Marc *hates* the nickname Tam.” Why hadn’t he sent the roses to Tamara Lynne, she wondered. Was he pulling back?

“Perhaps he’s just trying to please you,” Nurse Nessim suggested.

Maybe. But it raised a lot of doubts.

“Can we please try to call my parents again?” she asked Dr. Hassan. “I hate to keep asking, but it’s been more than a week.”

“Why certainly, my golden treasure.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, putting the receiver to her ear, “no answer again, perhaps they are on an excursion. Beautiful flowers they sent you, though; I’m glad our email reached them safely.”

“Flowers are nice, Dr. Hassan, but I want to *talk* to them.”

“What’s important right now is your health, Taamm. Now you go back to sleep.”

When the bruises on her back had faded to bluish yellow and the thick hard knots were starting to shrink, she could raise herself on her elbows and write more emails for the nurse to send.

“What’s the day today?” she inquired.

“It’s the eighteenth of Jumada Al-Akhir, in the year 1425,” Nes-sim told her.

“1425?” She shot him a playful look. “Sure, sure. When I left France it was 2005. Nessim, what have you done to five hundred and eighty years?”

Nessim laughed. “Taamm, Taamm, the Islamic calendar is based on Mohammed’s migration from Mecca to Medina. According to your calendar, that happened in 622.”

She did some quick arithmetic and was more befuddled than ever. “That’s absolutely nuts. Then it ought to be 1383. I can’t—”

“We use a lunar calendar that’s ten or eleven days shorter.”

“Oh.” She groaned. “Nessim, you naughty boy, you still haven’t told me what day it is.”

He laughed again. “All right, all right, it’s the 24th of July.”

“Frankly, I don’t understand why you don’t just use the same calendar as everybody else. Look, while you’re here, can we please try to call Bethesda again?”

“Of course.” Nessim brought the phone in and plugged it into the wall jack. He’d barely picked up the receiver when he was summoned urgently away. “I’ll be right back,” he assured her. “It’s real complicated, so I’ll make the call for you.”

Tammy waited for a moment, then sprang to life. Complicated? What did he take her for, a total ninny? She'd watched, so she knew the access code for international calls, and although the so-called "Arabic numerals" bore only occasional resemblances to what she was used to, she closed her eyes and dialed from finger-memory. The phone rang.

"Hello, Wellie?"

"Who's this?" he said absently. "Really awesome. Turn it up, Zyko, this song really rocks."

"Wellie, I can hardly hear you. This is Tam. Let me speak to Mom or Dad. I'm calling from overseas on somebody else's phone, so make it snappy."

"Not home. No, it's not Pelican, it's only my sister."

"Where are they?"

"Pelican and Julep? That's just it, they were supposed to be here *hours* ago. Oh, awesome, play it again, really awesome."

"Wellie, listen! I was kidnapped. I'm okay, but I'm in a hospital in an emirate on the Persian Gulf. I'll give you the number. Ask Mom and Dad to call me, okay?"

"Sure. Dad's over there looking for you. Hey, Zyko, get me a pencil. Hold on, Tam."

"Listen, potato-brain, hurry *up!*"

"Don't short your circuits, mudface. All right, go ahead."

She read it off to him and made him repeat it. She hung up less than ten seconds before Nessim opened the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Taamm. Don't worry, this time we'll get through." He put the receiver to her ear. The phone rang and rang. There was no answer.

"But—" Something told her not to elaborate.

How odd, she thought, how very odd.

The sixth trip around the block in noon traffic, Pierre's Gallic willingness to forgive a woman for being late had worn perilously thin. For the love of God, Tam, how long does it take you to buy a couple stupid souvenirs?

Twelve-thirty. Not at all like her to be so late. She was, after all, an American, and they were almost as chronometered as the Swiss. A little naïve, and cotton-candy idealistic, but it certainly wasn't like her to keep someone waiting so long.

Pierre swallowed. Naïve. No, no. That made it seem as if...no. He tried to push aside troubling thoughts. Maybe it wouldn't hurt, though, to have a look around.

"*Ah, oui,*" the toothless tomato-lady said, "beautiful girl, so friendly, such an adorable accent." She threw Pierre a knowing wink. "She went to the café. Over there."

The café. Of course. Knowing Tam, she'd probably made friends with half the customers. Somebody'd offered to buy her a cup of coffee, and...

“Je regrette, monsieur,” I’m sorry, sir, said the headwaiter. “She left here oh, probably eleven o’clock. She said she wanted to buy some presents in the Arab shops.” He chuckled. “I told her to be careful, because they might want to steal a pretty thing like her for their harems.” His laughter stopped abruptly when he saw the stricken look on Pierre’s face.

Pierre sighed. She was sure to be nearby, he told himself, maybe just got turned around on the way back to the pharmacy. Quarter of one. Clotilde must be getting worried. He dialed. *“Chou-chou?”* he said.

“Oh, *chéri*, how’d everything go?” Her voice was warm and welcome.

“Look, I’ve been delayed a little bit.”

“Your voice sounds funny. What’s the matter?”

No use getting her upset. “Oh, nothing, we’ll be back soon. Just wanted you to know that we’ll be a little late.”

He checked the pharmacy again. Then he drove slowly around, searching with growing desperation for any sign of a blonde ponytail.

One-fifteen. He rested his perspiring forehead on the steering wheel. Better call the police, he decided, just as a precaution. He tried to ignore the tiny voice within him that said it was already too late.

Merde, he thought, what a day. How will I ever break the news to Clotilde that the bank has turned me down? And how will I ever explain to John and Catherine that Tam has disappeared?

“Here’s where they found the market basket,” Pierre said with a trembling voice.

John put his hand on his Pierre’s shoulder. “Listen, we’ve been friends for fifteen years. This isn’t your fault, we don’t blame you. Things happen. Everything will turn out all right.”

“It’s not all right. I can’t sleep. I can’t—”

“We’ll find her. I have some pretty decent contacts, and so do you. I assume the shops around here have been searched?”

“Of course. Like the three monkeys, hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing.”

They walked together down the sidewalk. With every step, John wondered, is this where my Tammy-girl was snatched away from me? Is this where she cried for help and no one came? He had to keep himself together, especially in front of Pierre. John saw his daughter everywhere, and nowhere. What was happening to her? Was he a failure as a father, as a protector? He cut the thought short. Instead of beating up on himself, he had to concentrate on getting her home. His eye caught a display of brass bells.

“Oh, look, Pierre, this bell is like the one I got when we were in Algiers, remember?”

“Bonjour, messieurs,” said the shopkeeper, smiling brightly. “I have many more beautiful things inside. You like bell? From my own village, this bell.”

“Oh, so you’re from Algeria? I have one like it, actually.” John’s eyes swept the tiny establishment. Dingy. Cramped. Creepy. And the guy needed a dentist in the worst possible way.

“Yes, from Algeria. Look, monsieur, beautiful tray.”

“No, thanks,” John said, as they continued down the street. He turned to Pierre. “The door at the back of that place gave me the spooks. Who knows where it leads?”

“Perhaps,” said Pierre thickly, “that is the door to hell.”

Again and again, Tammy started letters to Marc and tore them up. This was just not what you could talk about in an email. Sometimes she made light of things; other times, she sensed she'd said too much. She could never seem to find the right balance of respect for his feelings and her own. How could she explain to him how filthy she felt, as if she could take twenty thousand showers and still not feel clean? It hadn't been her fault, but that didn't keep her from feeling guilty, and if she had such mixed emotions, how could she expect him to do otherwise?

She thought it would help to file a report with the police. Dr. Has-san hardly shared her enthusiasm, saying that under Islamic law rape was extremely difficult to prove, and that she would probably be disappointed. Nevertheless, since she insisted, he arranged for a police sergeant to interview her. She was annoyed at having to be veiled for the visit. Maybe it was one of the reasons the session went straight downhill.

The sergeant was a world-class nincompoop. Not only was he not the least bit scandalized about her abduction, he kept implying that it was her fault. He kept harping on how she'd entered the country illegally, wanted to know how long she'd been a prostitute, preached that in this part of the world where morality still had some value, prostitution was a serious crime, on and on. There she was, lying face down in a hospital room with rope burns on her wrists, her back a mass of bruises, and thirteen stitches up her rear, and Sgt. Nabil kept referring to her “alleged” abduction. She had to hold onto the bed linens with both hands to keep from jumping up and smacking him. He didn't bat an eye when she told him about Marisa; he said any slut willing to parade around in skimpy swimsuits in public had no business coming to a proper Muslim country in the first place.

“I'm sorry,” Dr. Hassan said after the idiot left, “but unfortunately that's about what I expected.”

“What year did you say this was?” she asked, ripping off the veil.

“Fourteen twenty-five.”

“Sounds just about right,” she fumed.

“Do you know how beautiful your eyes are when you get angry?” he asked with a slanting smile. “They're ten times bluer than usual.”

She groaned. “Sometimes I think you're as much of a Neanderthal as that lame excuse for a sergeant. I'm trying to talk about something serious and you want to talk about my eyes.” The stricken look on his face filled her with remorse. “I'm sorry, Doctor, I really am. You've been just wonderful and I shouldn't lump you in the same category with that jerk.”

“Thank you,” he said mildly. “Now let me check your stitches.”

As her health improved it got harder and harder for her to stay cooped up in the hospital room, but she wasn't allowed to venture into the hallway where – horrors! – a *man* might see her, so Dr. Hassan arranged for a hairdresser to give her a glorious cut and styling, followed by other specialists who

manicured, creamed, massaged, and lulled her into forgetting that she still hadn't been able to reach anyone by phone. She held on for dear life to what Wellie had said: *Dad's over there looking for you.*

The stitches came out. Within a few more days she walked. She sat – something she doubted she'd ever do again. She fidgeted. She wrote more emails. She practiced putting on the Yves Saint Laurent veil Mrs. Hassan brought her, logo discreetly embroidered in one corner of the double thickness of georgette, and startled herself with her black-veiled image in the mirror.

“Dear Clo,” she wrote for them to email, “Please bring the biggest, fattest *pain au chocolat* you can find and a whole carafe of Burgundy when you come meet me at the airport. I'll hold my mouth open and you just keep pouring, all right?”

She was really frustrated that phone calls never got through, and for days, they hadn't been able to reach anybody by email. She had an especially bad case of cabin fever one afternoon when a grinning Dr. Hassan showed up with a stack of newspapers. “I'm sorry to say, the Internet is still down all over this area. Thought you might like something to read, though,” he said. “I'm sorry they're so old, but they're the best I can do.”

Who cared? She shrieked when she saw an article on page four of the *International Herald-Tribune*.

Paris, July 17. (AP) –

Sources at the American Embassy in Paris confirmed today that 18-year-old Tamara Lynne Simmons of Bethesda, Maryland, has been declared a missing person since disappearing Tuesday morning in the Arab Quarter of Marseilles. Spokesmen say that concerted efforts by French authorities to locate the 5-foot-8-inch blue-eyed blonde have not yet been successful. She is described as tanned and fit, weighing approximately 125 pounds; when last seen she was wearing a long ponytail, jeans, and a Washington Redskins tee shirt.

John Willem Simmons, her father, 51, a former U.S. diplomat and presently owner of an international trading company, and her mother, Catherine Caldwell Simmons, 43, a well-known interior designer, say they have not given up hope. “She's smart and resourceful,” he said at a press conference in their colonial home. “We're confident that she'll turn up soon.”

Tamara, a recent graduate of Walt Whitman High School, is expected to enter the freshman class of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in September.

“Oh look! I made the paper!”

Dr. Hassan rapidly read the article. “Your father used to be a diplomat?”

“Yes, Doctor. Specialized in North African affairs.” Was it just her imagination, or did a faint wave of trouble just wash over him?

“Only three days left before your flight. Are you sure you don't want to stay here with me?”

“Thanks,” she replied, “I'll never forget you, but just between you and me, I'll be glad to get back to *civilization.*”

Igor Savitsky was a small mustachioed man with a solid hand-shake and a necktie that bore souvenirs, John thought with a chuckle, of every meal his friend had had for the past month.

“John Simmons, you rogue, you! It’s been years!”

“I heard about Manya,” John said, “I’m really sorry.”

The Interpol operative stared out the window at the water jet on Lake Geneva. Sighed. He started to say something, and stopped. “Yes. Thank you. Your news also disturbed me very deeply. What have you been able to find out?” When John outlined what little he knew, Igor nodded. “Classic. Marseilles is usually the port of choice. Destination is almost always the same: the Gulf. Tell me, John, how is Catherine holding up?”

“In public, she’s been brave. In private…” John twisted his face. “Tell me, what do you advise?”

“It’s very touchy, very touchy. Our success rate isn’t very good, Simmons, but every now and then we manage to put a ring out of business – temporarily – or get a girl out. Unfortunately the traffic in women is extremely profitable.”

“You’d think the authorities would have put a stop to it by now. It’s barbaric.”

“As long as there’s a market for pretty blondes, someone will be crooked enough to sell them. The authorities try, they really do. Very touchy, very touchy. Once a woman is smuggled in, she’s easy to conceal. What are we going to do, go around raiding the harems of some of the richest men in the world and rip veils off the women to see if they match the missing-person reports? And even when we locate a girl, what can you do? They’re locked up, guarded with automatic weapons, and the walls are twelve feet high. They even keep their legitimate wives and daughters closed up, even more so girls who’d want to run away.”

“Educate me here. How do these traffickers operate?”

“Okay, typically they place an ad in a Northern European news-paper or online for a model of a certain physical type, such as Nordic, or for a part in a movie, or for a glamorous-sounding job. When a girl shows up they ask a few key questions to find out if anybody is with her. Block all avenues of exit, then overpower her. Drug her, take her to a central location, load the girls into crates marked as some sort of industrial equipment, and take them to the port of Marseilles. Grease a few palms. Load them onto small vessels that carry a dozen or two at a time. A couple more greased palms, and off they go to a broker, where they’re distributed to harems, brothels, gentlemen’s clubs, what have you.” He decided not to mention “snuff clubs,” where disciplinary problems or simply unlucky victims were tortured to death for entertainment.

“It’s astonishingly well organized!”

“Oh yes indeed. But say, you get 20 girls at an average \$50,000 each, that’s a million bucks, so it’s not hard to find people willing to try.”

“Fifty thousand dollars?”

“Well, Asians, Latinas, and Africans cost a lot less, but a tall buxom blonde could go for double that. Listen, they recently raided a brothel in Monte Carlo where Arabs would pay \$1200 to spend an hour with a tall blonde, just an hour. Twice that if they wanted to strap her down. Turns out, by the way, that Danish housewives were making themselves some nice little extra pocket money, because they got to keep \$400 for every hour they worked. Do the math, \$50,000 is amortized really fast, so it’s a real bargain if you want your very own blonde. Besides, once you have a fancy house and luxury cars and a \$200,000 watch and a stableful of thoroughbreds, what else can you do with your money? Buy a well-stocked harem.”

Igor shrugged, then continued. "Now, besides the syndicates that operate dozens of brothels catering to every possible taste, there are also lone operators, and these guys are really, really difficult to track down. For instance, there was one extremely handsome Pakistani who presented himself as a successful businessman. He'd go to a village, pick out the prettiest girl, pay her parents a princely sum that made them very happy, marry her, and take her off to the Gulf where he'd divorce her and sell her off. Then he'd go to another village. It's only when he'd done this 19 times that an immigration official started to get suspicious."

"Actually marry her? Jeez."

"Yes. The families were delighted. It's really no big deal. Even the syndicates often 'marry' the girl to a front-man to put a veneer of respectability to the operation and further complicate efforts to extract a so-called married woman from her so-called husband's home. We know of one guy who's been 'married' more than 700 times, then 'I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.' I don't want to be dis-couraging, Simmons, but it's really difficult. Our best chance is to find somebody who's out for revenge. Traffickers are not nice people. They've done a lot of bad things to a lot of people and have more than their share of enemies.

"If we manage to smuggle out the girl, we also have to smuggle out the informant, or we doom him to certain death. But it means double the complications." He reached into his desk. "Here's the number of a former colleague who's freelance now. He's managed to spring a few, and if anybody can help you, he's your man. Go see him. And tell him I have found without a doubt the best dim sum in Geneva."

"What about this clinic? We tried and tried but couldn't ever get through."

"I'm checking it out. Let's hope it's a good Samaritan, but it might just be part of a syndicate." He decided not to elaborate on why syndicates needed good repair doctors as well as surgeons not too fussy about what body parts they cut off, enlarged, replaced...

The two men embraced. "Let's stay in close touch," John said.

"My prayers go with you." He added to himself, You'll no doubt need them.

Even though her bruises were fading and turning into hard lumps, and she got frequent assurances that she wouldn't have permanent marks, she often felt depressed. On those days, the slightest thing would set her off, which startled and embarrassed her, because she couldn't stand weepy women.

"It's normal," Dr. Hassan reassured her. "My golden treasure, you're a strong girl, but you can't expect to get over such traumatic events in a mere three weeks. You might consider getting counseling when you get home."

The twenty-ninth of Jumada Al-Akhir finally arrived. Home! Tammy could almost smell it. She rose at dawn, flitted merrily around the room, and got everything ready with hours to spare. Time to write a few more emails, including a long one to Elaine. "I'm sorry Marisa wasn't alive when we were rescued, but otherwise, she was lucky. Can you imagine how horrible it must be, closed up in a spooky harem, and you try to run away and they beat you, and this old geezer slobbers all over you and gets you pregnant, and you know you're stuck there for the rest of your *life*? I mean, just think how horrible it would be if you were forced to live with somebody as creepy as Martin Higgenbotham, or a brute like Fuad!"

The Internet was still down, but she knew she could impose on Dr. Hassan one last time and get him to send the messages for her as soon as it was back up. She left them on the rolling table along with thank-you notes to him and Nurse Nessim.

Just as she was prepared to leave, the nurse appeared. "I need to give you one last shot," he said. "This will help prevent jet lag."

"Thank you so much for everything," she said, overcoming the urge to hug him. "*Shukran shukran shukran shukran*," she said, hoping that by sheer volume she could make up for her almost-non-existent Arabic vocabulary. "When I get home I'll send you something so you can remember the girl from *Amrikiya*."

"*Allah maa kum*," may God be with you, he replied.

Suddenly overcome by gratitude for those who had offered a hand of kindness to a suffering person, she went quickly outside.

She inspected the contents of her beige snakeskin handbag. Ticket? Check. New passport? Check. The 100 euros Dr. Hassan had insisted on giving her? Check. His card, so she could write and let him know how she was doing? Yes. Everything was just perfect, except for the fact that she had to cover up her beige pleated Gucci with the stupid black cloak.

Enveloped as she was in the ankle-length black *abaaya*, a hair wrap, and a long black veil, just in the fifty feet or so between the air-conditioned clinic and the white stretch limo, she thought she'd positively suffocate. She felt bizarre, too, as if she weren't actually a person at all, but just an oversize Idaho potato wrapped up in a black bag.

She'd resisted the veil. "If Arab women let men oppress them, it's their business," she said, "but I'm not covering up my face."

He gasped. "It's not oppression at all," he explained, "just a little different sense of decency. No self-respecting Arab woman would expose her face to strange men any more than you'd walk topless down the Champs Elysées. My wife, for instance, who studied in Paris, wouldn't have things any other way. She likes having men deal with her on the basis of her intelligence rather than on her looks."

Her dad had always insisted that they respect other cultures, so she finally broke down and let him put the darn thing on her. What a pain! Even her own mother wouldn't have known her. Brother, she thought, am I glad I don't have to fool with this stuff all the time.

The two suitcases went into the trunk. Dr. Hassan had said that it would be preferable, since she didn't speak the language, to let the driver handle the airport formalities. It annoyed her – didn't these men think women were capable of *anything?* – but she capitulated and let the driver take the ticket and passport. She eased into the white leather seat. She sighed contentedly, and to her amusement, the veil puffed out. She experimented blowing it out and sucking it in. Fascinating.

She groaned when she noticed that the limo windows were heavily curtained, reminding her of a hearse. Dr. Hassan had told her that the Arabic word for "chaste" or "clean" also meant "well guarded," but they took things to ridiculous lengths. Oh well, just this once was no big deal. Besides, she was feeling downright woozy. "Yes, Jensen, another glass of champagne, thank you dahling. Oh, dear me, an emergency! I've nicked a nail! Fifi, quick, a manicure, dahling." The veil obligingly went puff-puff-puff. How could Arab women talk to each other and manage to keep a straight face?

The driver cast questioning looks at her as she chattered away to herself. Okay, so she was feeling silly, but didn't she deserve a little fun? What really mattered was that she was on her way *home*.

She felt like she'd had about three "ti many martoonis" by the time they arrived at a huge gated compound where Dr. Hassan had mentioned that they would drop something off. She hadn't expected to get out of the car, but after the driver spoke briefly with one of the sentinels, he drove through the gate and grandly opened the door.

"Oum Mohammed, Sheikh Khalid's wife, invites you to have a refreshing glass of lemonade with her."

"But we need to get to the airport."

"We have time. It would be extremely rude to refuse, and ten or fifteen minutes won't really matter. Don't spend all afternoon, though, or you'll miss your plane."

"Fat chance of that!" Maybe some lemonade would perk her up a little. She finally located the assorted parts of the black lump and managed to get them all out into the staggering heat. She almost swooned.

Ferocious-looking guards draped with bandoliers of ammunition relaxed on a wide arched portico, behind them to the left a beautiful white marble building, to the right a vine-covered wrought iron gate. One of them nodded politely and unlocked it, and Tammy was admitted into a small courtyard where she was immediately greeted by two smiling women wearing long dresses but – much to her indignation – no cloaks or veils. Then she remembered. Behind a locked gate. Behind a high wall. What Dr. Hassan would call "protected."

"*Ahlan wa-sahlan,*" Welcome welcome, the taller and very pregnant one said, a large-boned woman of maybe 35 with a plain face and pretty eyes. "*Ismii Zeynab. Zeynab,*" she repeated with a smile. My name is Zeynab.

They seemed to be expecting her.

"*Ismii Haifa,*" My name is Haifa, the other one said. She was much younger, quite pretty, Asian, and only half as pregnant. "*Alham-dulillah alla salama.*" She knew Alhamdulillah meant thank God, because Dr. Hassan made sure she said it after every meal.

"*Ismii Tam,*" she replied, recklessly using up a huge percentage of the Arabic that Nurse Nessim had taught her. She said it a little more breathily than she had to, to make the veil puff out. It did. She giggled. Haifa and Zeynab seemed puzzled. Then she giggled again because they hadn't. They exchanged nervous glances, like, are Americans always this harebrained?

"Taamm." They pronounced her name like Dr. Hassan did, stretching it out like salt-water taffy. He said it meant "complete," but for all she knew it meant "complete idiot." The trouble was, she was never entirely sure she could believe him, because he was always skating on the border between chivalry and mischief and wasn't above saying something flattering even if it weren't entirely true.

The courtyard was set with potted geraniums and lemon trees. A grape arbor provided a little thin shade, cutting the 120-degree heat to a mere 115 or so. Off to the back was an odd wooden building with a pair of huge doors that looked like they belonged on a medieval castle. She giggled. Zeynab let them through with a six-inch key. She and Haifa helped Tammy out of the cloak and veil and exclaimed admiringly over her wilted Gucci. Her wrappings took their place, next to many others, on hooks by the door. They were as alike as quarters. How would she know the right one to take when she left? She giggled again. What difference could it possibly make?

It was only marginally cooler inside the house. That lemonade, perchance? Dr. Hassan had said that Sheikh Khalid was a fabulously wealthy commodities trader. Maybe so, but his house was a shambles. From the entryway of chipped patterned tiles, they climbed a rickety stairway that led to a shabby living room with lattice-covered windows and built-in couches. Two middle-aged women were doing needlework and a curly-haired girl was teaching a teddy bear how to read. Oh good, Tammy thought, now for that lemonade. She stopped, too dizzy to continue, and steadied herself. She made circles in the air with her finger, and they seemed to understand. They helped her up and continued around a couple of odd corners, up two or three more small flights of swayback wooden stairs, flattening themselves against a wall while squealing twin boys raced by. I'll be darned, she thought, if this is where the women and children live, it must be the harem. I'm actually visiting a sheikh's harem. Wait until Elaine hears about this!

It wasn't at all like Hollywood had led her to expect. A touching crayon drawing of a purple horse? What, no belly dancers, no be-jeweled women in harem pants lounging seductively on fringed sofas? Where were the naked-chested eunuchs in draped pants and gold earrings? Even an ironing board? Her father would be pleased with all the stereotypes this short visit had exploded.

Next stop on the tour was a small dim room furnished only with a window-seat. Tammy looked politely out the window, trying to see what the world looked like through a carved lattice screen. She turned around just in time to see the door close. That's odd, she thought, where'd everybody go?

A heavy bolt slid solidly into place.

PART TWO SHEIKH KHALID

August – September 2005
(Rajab – Shaban 1425)

Everything suddenly made horrifying sense: what the driver was supposed to deliver to Sheikh Khalid was *her*. How, how had she missed all the signposts? The way Dr. Hassan always deftly changed the subject when she pressed him for details about her rescue. The fact that nobody called, only sent flowers, which could have come from the corner florist. Marc's using the name "Tam." The odd coincidence about the telephone. The "anti jet-lag shot" that was probably a strong sedative. She was furious at herself for being so gullible, but no amount of self-reproach was going to unlock that door.

No, it couldn't be, she fought back, Dr. Hassan bought me the ticket; I had it in my own hand. Why would he buy it if he wanted me to stay here?

Why not? Those pesky little demons retorted, *especially if it made you believe what you desperately wanted to believe?*

And replacing the passport? All the trouble he'd gone to for that?

It was probably a forgery, and besides, a passport and ticket don't do you a particle of good if the driver takes them away. Face it, Tam, you've been bamboozled. Dr. Hassan has you right where he wants you.

"Oh, that's a bunch of nonsense!" she said aloud, but she threw up all over the rug anyway.

I know, she told herself, gagging on the sour stench that over-whelmed the stuffy little room. I've just stumbled into someone else's nightmare. If I can only wake up again in the right place, everything will be just fine. The right place, though, was on the other side of that bolted door.

Crippled hours doddered by. She cried occasionally, but mostly she was angry. With herself for falling headlong into Dr. Hassan's insidious trap. With him, for callously preying on her. Night fell. She lay frozen in terror at every footfall, every sound. She thought of the old man's picture in the entryway. Was this the moment she'd have to feel his hands upon her?

The door opened. The room spun crazily. Trembling like a cornered rabbit, she followed the shaft of light with her eyes.

Zeynab steadied her with a gentle hand, soothed her with reas-suring words, consoled her with dark brown eyes that brimmed over with kindness and good will. She cleaned up the vomit, set down a plate of food and a bottle of water, took her to the primitive bathroom, and gave her two little blue pills. When Tammy looked confused, Zeynab lay her hand against her cheek to indicate that they would help her sleep. Within minutes, alone again in the dark, she'd dissolved into an amorphous puddle, devoid of feeling or consciousness.

Abubakr was not encouraging. "Not only are we looking for a needle in a haystack, but we don't even know which haystack. A thousand-to-one chance. Our best shot to find her is via Bedouin guards and drivers; they're bigger gossips than old women. Once we know where she is, then we can strategize. We need code names. I'll be – uh, why not Chopsticks? You be Simba, Swahili for lion. Tamara will be

Bulbul; that's Arabic for nightingale. Here's a map of the entire region, with sectors indicated. Also, here's a secure number. Call every few days. Keep conversations short and sweet and don't reveal more than you need to. We'll exchange whatever we're able to find out."

John sighed. "Okay, let's keep our fingers crossed."

"We'll do our best for you, I promise."

For several days Tammy sat on the settee in that bleak little room, existing in a second state, a different dimension, an inside-out corpse with a living body and a dead soul. Zeynab brought her food, but she was so sick to her stomach she could scarcely get anything past her lips.

Then she had trouble with her plumbing at the other end. Oh no, she thought as she realized she needed a bathroom, what a lousy time to have diarrhea! She rapped on the door, hoping that someone would understand, but no one came. She struggled. She waited. Finally she couldn't hold it any longer. She chose a corner of the room and let it loose, tears of humiliation streaming down her cheeks. Not only was she locked in, now the room smelled to high heaven. She couldn't even wipe herself clean.

Several hours later Zeynab brought her a plate of food. Tammy shrugged an embarrassed apology, sobbing in despair. Zeynab sport-ingly cleaned up the mess and understood Tammy's frantic signals that she needed the bathroom again urgently. She took her there, but after-wards, bolted the door again. Twice more, positively mortified, Tammy had no choice but to soil the room again.

The first time Zeynab let her have a bath she was stunned. At Zeynab's behest she took off her dress and sat on a little stool in the corner of a tiled square, soaped up, and held on, while Zeynab dipped into a drum and threw basinsful of heated water at her.

But that was the ultimate modern convenience compared to the toilet. She'd never forgotten her first morning in the harem when Zeynab had showed her what to do. The plumbing didn't work right, so she had to climb a ladder and fill the tank, way up by the ceiling, from a bucket that was extremely hard to maneuver over her head. She balanced on two raised footrests and squatted, hoping like crazy she wouldn't slip. Finally she pulled a chain connected to the flush tank.

At that precise moment a loud clap of thunder rattled the house. Thunder? No, jet planes and anti-aircraft fire! The Marines! She dived under the towel-table, heart pounding fiercely.

Zeynab didn't seem too worried. She was leaning against the wall, breathless with laughter. Okay, sister, Tammy wanted to tell her, we're talking Shores of Tripoli and A Few Good Men. She cocked her ear for the final barrage. What she heard instead were thunderous bangs and clangs and gurgles and splutters that sounded like a thousand sledge hammers attacking the pipes. Zeynab, still leaning against the wall, pointed weakly to the toilet.

What? All that? No way.

Tammy sheepishly crawled back out. Nothing like impressing everybody with her suave sophistication, right? Brother, she wondered, with plumbing as noisy as that how'd you ever go to the bathroom without everybody knowing? She soon found out: you didn't. You never did *anything* in that place without everybody knowing.

Her fourth afternoon in the harem, a fuzzy-edged Haifa opened the door and beckoned. Her mouth went dry and her palms began to sweat. Leave her safe cocoon? Oh, no, she thought, here it comes. She stum-bled along, shimmers of terror shooting through her.

In a downstairs salon food was laid out on mats. The elegant old woman with the incandescent eyes said something friendly, and grace-ful long fingers indicated where she should sit. Tammy sat, transfixed with fear, conscious of appraising stares, getting an occasional spoonful of yogurt past her mouth, until one by one the others murmured "*Alhamdulillah,*" Thank God, and left.

Haifa accompanied her back upstairs. Tammy stopped to study the photograph of Sheikh Khalid. He was a striking aristocratic man of 65 or 70, in long white robes and a white headdress held by black ropes. She'd almost decided he was handsome when she noticed the arrogant tilt to his chin, the bloodless lips, the cunning eyes. She felt a sudden chill. Brother, she thought, that expression belongs on a crocodile.

Haifa had a full mouth that smiled at the slightest provocation and big black eyes that radiated friendliness. She patted Tammy's hand and took her back to her room. Don't worry, she seemed to say, we know it's hard at first, but we're nice people and we'll help you. Sheikh Khalid is patient. Oum Mohammed is gracious. And I am prepared to be your friend.

Tammy smiled wanly at her. Haifa's concern was touching, and it certainly helped take a small edge off the pain, but a generous heart couldn't erase reality. She sighed as she stretched out on the worn blue velvet window-seat. What was worse, she wondered, being behind a bolted door? Or the frightening world on the other side?

After a week, Zeynab stopped giving Tammy pills during the day, and would give her only one at night. Soon there were none at all. "Please, Zeynab, I need them. If I let myself think about what's happening I'll go insane," she begged, but Zeynab smiled apologetically and shook her head. Face all those people twice a day with her mind unobscured? It was as if the protective peel had been removed from her brain, exposing it raw and tremulous, pleading for reality to come and swallow it.

And so it did. Where before there had been disbelief now there was outrage. Where there had been numbness there was now frustration, where there had been uncertainty there was now crippling fear. "Why me?" she demanded of the wooden walls of her room, stained dark from generations of despondency. "Just what are you going to do with me?" she challenged the picture in the entryway, pulling herself tall with indignation. "Don't you know that this is 2005 and there are laws against these things?" The man with the crocodile eyes smiled smugly past his aquiline nose. *What do you think I intend to do with you?* she could almost hear him cackle.

Now that her brain was in working order again she decided she simply had to escape, and the overwhelming odds against success didn't slow her down a bit. She was hemmed in by people all day and locked up at night, not to mention the high walls and the guards outside. Zeynab or Haifa even escorted her to and from the bathroom.

Tammy sensed that Oum Mohammed's x-ray eyes could see right through that door. Her serenity was unnerving. Long aristocratic fingers wielded knitting needles like a maestro's baton and dispensed money, permission, keys, instructions. One well-aimed glance from her small black eyes could stop a missile. Once she caught Tammy picking her nose, and that Look made her feel like she'd been trampled on. Oum Mohammed never raised her voice, but heaven help you if she took her glasses off and set her knitting down. Even the twins – the most undisciplined brats Tammy had ever seen – were so unnerved by her eyes that a steady gaze would fling them screaming into their mother's arms.

Often, Oum Mohammed would ask the latest addition to the harem to hold the yarn for her while she wound it; at such times Tammy would just sit on the threadbare blue-and-red rug and look around. The once-elegant living room with its latticed windows and frayed velvet curtains was much like Oum

Mohammed herself, who forty years before must have been a much sought-after beauty. Her skin was flawless, almost waxen. It was only her eyes that betrayed her advancing years. They glittered with too much knowledge, too much experience, too much self-control; they consumed everything around them, digested, analyzed. They weren't really the eyes of an old woman, but they couldn't have belonged to anyone young.

Oum Mohammed's eyes settled disapprovingly on the glamorous Leyla, smiling indulgently as her twins climbed on the curtains and poured date molasses on the rug. Leyla gulped, dissolved, and took her two-year-olds elsewhere.

Must you insist on being such a peasant? The eyes reprimanded Oum Hussein, Sheikh Khalid's other wife, a plump, overly loud, un-kempt but good-natured woman of perhaps 50 who spent all day embroidering. Oum Hussein shrugged confidentially in Tammy's direction, as if they were both privates in the army of a troublesome general. She's always uptight, that's her job, hon, Oum Hussein seemed to say.

Other times, Oum Mohammed took aim at Tammy's unspoken terror. I know why my husband has brought you here, those eyes told her. Despite what my own wishes might be I accept graciously whatever life requires of me and so, my dear, must you.

Which only served as a reminder to Tammy that she had to get out of that place before...before it was too late. That old man? She just couldn't. She wouldn't. She had to find a way *out*.

Oum Mohammed ignored her martyred pout and spoke to her. Maybe she was recounting her childhood; maybe she was explaining the sexual fantasies of her husband. Even if she'd spoken fluent Arabic, she doubted that very much would have soaked in. One thing she understood: the undercurrent of finality. This is where you are. This is what you are going to do.

She studied her room, looking for some flaw. It was roughly seven by eight, drunkenly skewed to one side. There was one big window, covered with a lattice box, which, while it served the purpose of calming Arab paranoia about keeping women hidden, also cut sunlight into flower-shaped pieces and siphoned off half the air. The built-in settee covered with a worn cut-velvet throw and a couple faded blue cushions ran from one end to the other of the window wall. The bare overhead bulb had burned out. The ceiling fan, a quarter-inch thick with dust, didn't even wheeze. At high noon the room was dim, stuffy, and thoroughly depressing; in the dark it was filled with the ghosts of other fears, other miseries.

Could she unscrew the door hinges and slip out? Too rusty. Besides, she'd never get past the courtyard. Pry some loose boards out and let herself down? She couldn't pull them away with her bare hands, and pounding would attract too much attention. Tammy looked out the shrouded third-story window, trying to identify a way to climb down. The view was hardly an inspiration: an outdoor laundry with big old-fashioned tubs, a clothesline, even a wringer! Beyond was a high wall, and beyond that, scrub desert. Not a tree, not a house, not a sign of civilization. Where, crossed her mind, would she run *to*?

Well, she thought, I'll just find some other way to get out of this fire-trap. She made a mental blueprint of the building, a complicated warren of oddly arranged rooms. Adjoining areas rarely had the same floor level; either she stepped up or stepped down, but she always had to keep one eye on where she put her feet. Going anywhere was a major operation. Down two stairs and up three, double back, go around, climb over, duck under. She wanted to weep in frustration. How was she ever going to escape from the blasted place if it took GPS just to get down-stairs?

Almost for lack of anything else to do, she continued to scheme. Locks? Guards? Nosy women? She was going to get *out*. She considered bribing the guards and stealing a car. She thought about jumping Oum Mohammed and grabbing her keys.

Then she had a stroke of genius: she'd simply get a taxi. She still had the 100 euros that Dr. Hassan had given her; she could get to the airport or the Embassy and have a ticket sent in. Her big problem was how to make a quick getaway in high-heeled shoes. Another one of Dr. Hassan's diabolical plans, damn him! But high heels were still better than being barefoot when her big chance arose.

Every day when Haifa would get her, Tammy would clomp down-stairs to the salon for lunch, which was usually served at about five-thirty, according to the grandfather clock. Like so many other things in the harem, she was convinced it simply didn't work. When the men had eaten their fill in the big marble house next door, the leftovers were sent to the harem. Sometimes the women got platters of couscous, gristle, and carrot; sometimes it was nothing but fishbones and rice.

Tammy was scandalized. What kind of selfish bastard would make his own wife eat leftovers? The more she thought about it, the madder she got. The day that lunch consisted of nothing but bread soaked in meat juice, when the men had clearly polished off an entire lamb roast, she exploded. "How do you put up with this nonsense?" she demanded of Oum Mohammed, who for once seemed thoroughly perplexed.

Haifa looked at her funny and knitted her brow. *Now* what was the matter?

The women had as much breakfast as they wanted, though, because Haifa fixed it. Behind the harem was a half-outdoor kitchen that looked ancient enough to have witnessed visits from the Prophet himself. Zeynab and Tammy would bring wood for the fire, while Haifa filled teakettles from the water filter. Inside, in a beautiful salon with blue-patterned tiled walls and floors, they set plates of fruit and bread on mats on the rug, and then retraced their convoluted steps up to the living room.

When breakfast was over, except for Zeynab and Haifa, they'd all troop to the second-floor salon, where a groaning air conditioner made a little difference in spite of all the cracks and gaps in the walls. Except for its rundown condition, it was a pleasant room, downright sunny by Arab standards with windows on three sides – albeit covered with wooden screens. Wall lamps were often unnecessary – fortunately, since only two of the six worked. Built-in settees lined the walls; mismatched threadbare oriental rugs covered the floor.

Right after midday, all the residents of the harem assembled for the *dhuhr*, or noon prayers. Tammy was enchanted. It was a moving scene, the women and children standing and kneeling in unison. She hated to admit that she liked anything at all about Sheikh Khalid's harem, but seeing that family pray together never failed to stir her. It reminded her of church services with her own family, and she was stricken with aching loneliness.

Tammy hated the place because it interfered with her life, but it would have interfered with her decorator mother's respiration. She could just picture her, frantically ripping the screens off the windows, suggesting a "cheerful" color scheme, wondering how fast she could get the contractors to shore up the sagging beams. Her heart lurched. Mom. What was she thinking? Did she still have shreds of hope? Or had one of Dad's friends at the State Department sat her down and gently explained that girls who vanish never reappear?

Soft laughter brought her back to the harem. Rokhiya – Moham-med's very pregnant wife and Oum Mohammed's daughter-in-law – was off in one corner tutoring the three older children. Leyla, also pregnant, sat on cushions on the floor, sighed languorously, shot murderous looks in Tammy's direction, and drove Haifa to distraction on silly errands. Oum Hussein was on a window-seat embroidering, and

Oum Mohammed took her place on another and knitted. Tammy wondered what she was working on. A muffler, perhaps, for the Planet Earth? Or merely sweaters for every member of the human race?

Tammy had to admit that Leyla was beautiful, with huge long-lashed eyes and luxuriant wavy black hair, and thought that maybe the reason she resented Tammy so much was because she threatened her title as the prettiest woman in the harem. Leyla was resolutely shallow, just the kind of woman Tammy had been brought up to hold in polite contempt. She whined. She toyed with her make-up. She filed her nails. She read her fashion magazines and photo-romans. She played with her jewelry. And she thought her demolition-derby twins were adorable no matter what.

Tammy noticed one thing: Leyla was too high-class, too aristo-cratic, to actually take care of her twins, but Haifa wasn't allowed to discipline them. Result: two wild animals.

Tammy was so bored she was beside herself. She couldn't participate in conversations, there was no radio or TV, and only a few Arabic-language magazines. Once, when Oum Mohammed had to go to the men's house to respond to a buzzer from her husband, Tammy was overjoyed to find a stray copy of English-language *Vogue*. Of course, it was Leyla's, and when she caught Tammy leafing through it, she almost bit her head off.

Tammy had been in the harem ten days, when one morning, Oum Mohammed settled down to do some accounts, and Tammy was sent downstairs to help Haifa scrub the parlor. She took off her shoes, careful to hide the folded bill far in the toe.

The physical exertion felt wonderful. It had been over a month since Fuad, and her back was still covered in hard knots, but she didn't mind playing Cinderella, lifting the heavy buckets for Haifa and taking satisfaction in the gleam of the beautiful tiles.

"*Ya Haifa!*" (Yoo-hoo, Haifa), whined Leyla from upstairs.

Haifa sighed, dried her hands, and trudged dutifully off.

Alone! Downstairs! Heart pounding, Tammy grabbed a cloak and veil and threw them on as she raced across the courtyard. The gate was unlocked, and she strode through. Look self-assured, she told herself, as if you sneaked out of harems every day.

Damn. A guard had noticed her. Smiling, but coming her way. "*Sabah al-khayr, ya aanisah.*" Good morning, miss.

She nodded politely. Best thing, bluff it. Act normal. Momentary panic. She knew how to say please – different if you were addressing a man or a woman – but what was the Arabic word for taxi? She closed her eyes. What had they been called in Morocco? "*Taksi, min fadlik,*" she said, holding up her bill.

"*Taksi, ya aanisah?*"

It worked! He'd understood her! Uh-oh. Calm down, she told herself, all he probably wanted to know was where to. She was ready with the word for airport. "*Al-mataar.*"

The guard smiled again. "*Hal anti Taamm?*" Are you Tam?

Damn. Even a veil couldn't conceal blue eyes. There was only one thing to do. She put the bill firmly in his hand.

He shook his head and gave it back to her. "*Laa, laa, ya aanisah.*" No no, miss. And he led her politely back to the gate.

Haifa was in the courtyard, hand clutching her heart. When she saw Tammy she let loose a barrage of emotional Arabic.

Haifa hung their cloaks and veils back on the hook, shaking her head. She beckoned, and Tammy followed her meekly to a wooden chest in the corner of the salon. Haifa opened it and withdrew a small whip.

“American?” Haifa suddenly asked.

“Yes. From right outside Washington.” Tammy was confused.

“Your little tirade the other day about the food...”

“Positively outrageous. Leftovers!”

“Get used to it. Listen, my real name is Carlita and I’m from the Philippines. Everybody thinks you’re Swedish, so don’t let on. Don’t *ever* speak English to me in front of anybody.”

“But—”

“I’ve been here for nine years. I know. You scared me half to death. Don’t ever do that again, or they’ll whip us both.”

Tammy flinched. “How on earth did you end up here?”

“A recruiter came to Los Baños and said wealthy Arab households were looking for housekeepers. Top salary, great benefits, free transportation. A bunch of us signed on, because we couldn’t find jobs at home, and it sounded just wonderful. Our families threw us send-off parties because of all the money we’d be sending home.”

She bit her lip, refilled a bucket, and continued as they both worked on the floor. “When I got here, the first thing they did was gang rape me. They kept me in a room like a jail cell in the basement of the big house. I don’t even know how many men came to that cell. Finally they locked the door and about a week later, when I had more or less recovered, they brought me to the harem. Oum Mohammed immediately took my passport and locked it up in the safe. Then they gave me a mountain of ironing to do. And an Indonesian maid named Fatima was responsible for keeping an eye on me.”

“Like you have to watch me,” Tammy added, catching on.

“Exactly. You’re lucky; you belong to the Sheikh, nobody else can touch you. But I belong to the house, which means I’m fair game. Men in the compound can send for me whenever they like, and between the guards and the drivers and the houseboys and the stable boys and the gardeners and the cooks and the stewards, the ironing piled up, especially the first month or so when every man here had to check me out. But Oum Mohammed was furious about the ironing, so she had me beaten. Bad. I was in bed for almost a week. Hello? Didn’t she realize how busy I was? After two months I got up the nerve to ask for my paycheck, and the reaction was, *pay you? We bought you!* That’s when it hit me that I was a slave. In 1996! So I tried to run away. Got caught, of course, and they beat the soles of my feet. I couldn’t walk for weeks, had to crawl everywhere. You just try crawling up and down these stairs. Leyla laughed at me. I even had to crawl over to the big house when somebody would send for me. You’re really lucky it was Suleyman who caught you; if it’d been somebody else, they’d have done the same thing to you. Plus they’d have whipped me because I was supposed to watch you.”

Tammy blanched. Whipped? Did she say *whipped*? She went pale. Then she remembered the whip that Haifa had shown her.

Haifa touched her stomach. “This is my fifth child. As soon as the baby’s born they’ll take it. They tell me it’ll be adopted into a good home, but Suleyman says it’ll be sold to a pedophile.”

She was crying now. “I thought this was such a wonderful opportunity, but it’s nothing but hell. If it weren’t for Suleyman, I’d have gone insane. This is his child. Everybody else leaves me alone now out of respect for him. He even asked permission to marry me, but Sheikh Khalid refused. After all, then he’d have to go to the trouble of buying another slave. He’s trying to find a way for us to run away together, but it’s so hard. He recently met a guy who wants to help us, but we have to be really careful.”

“Can I go with you?”

Haifa smiled. “Sure, but we haven’t figured out how. These people think that because they have money, they can get away with anything. And the trouble is, it’s usually true. Nine years I’ve been trapped here in this hell-hole. Nine years.”

Damn. Suleyman was a guard, and even he hadn’t been able to find a hole in the system.

Tammy made a mental inventory of the harem. “Have I met Fatima?”

“Umm, no, umm, she died in childbirth. It was a breech delivery and the midwife couldn’t help her. And they couldn’t call in a male doctor because he’d have to see her female parts, and that’s against Sheikh Khalid’s rules. One thing I’ve learned is, there’s no such thing here as male and female human beings. Two different species: men, with lots of privileges, and women, who are like pet dogs. Useful body parts, and sometimes amusing, but utterly expendable, especially if you’re not part of the nobility. *Everything* depends on gender. Have you noticed? If Leyla’s sitting somewhere and her brats want that place, she has to defer to them, because they’re male. Their own mother! Of course they’re spoiled, they’re *boys*.” She almost spat the words out.

“Tell me about Sheikh Khalid.”

“You’re lucky, Tam, the sheikh isn’t a pervert, like a lot of them. He has a big appetite – the last new girl he had he kept for four days – but at least he won’t brutalize you. That’s an old picture, by the way, he’s 81.”

“81? Did you say 81? Oh, brother. So, what happened to her?”

“She smothered her baby and was sold to an S&M club. No matter how bad you think things are, there’s always somewhere worse, and they make sure you know that.”

“Sorry, but what’s S&M?”

“Oh lord, you really are new here. Sadism and masochism.”

Tammy felt weak. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Get used to it. There’s a huge, huge underground network of men’s clubs that cater to every fetish, every fantasy, every sort of per-version, and surprise surprise, you’ve been sucked into that vortex. They even have what they call a snuff club, where they get their jollies by torturing people. You’re basically a piece of meat, and nobody cares what happens to you. If you don’t follow orders, they’ll sell you somewhere worse. And if you don’t follow orders there, you might as well stop eating. They have high-class clubs that don’t allow violence, but in most of them, anything goes. At the Ranch they brand the women and keep them in stables. At the Frontier, in cages. There’s one place – I can’t remember the name – they fuse the soles of your feet together. At least here we’re well fed, and Oum Mohammed only has us beaten every now and then. Suleyman tells me that in some places, the servants are raped practically every day and beaten all the time just to keep them under control.”

You won't ever be able to get away, her demons sniped. But she told herself resolutely that one way or another, she'd get her life back.

She'd have only one attempt. If it failed...it just couldn't. She had to pull it off, and soon. Meanwhile, she had to lie low and pretend she'd given up hope.

"You're right," Suleyman told Haifa, "we almost gave up. But I met a guy named Chopsticks who wants to help us, and he promised he would, as long as we help smuggle out the new girl. He said we should wait until the last possible minute to tell her, though, so she won't accidentally tip anybody off. He got very excited when I told him about the new wing they're going to build onto the men's house; he said it'll provide a good amount of confusion as well as construction vehicles coming in and out. I have his phone number and I'll give him a call as soon as the work starts." He gave Haifa a soft kiss. "My dear little Haifa, we're only a few weeks away from being together."

"We've located Bulbul," Abubakr announced to a very keyed-up John, "sector 11C. She's in the home" – he almost said harem, which he knew wouldn't be what a father wanted to hear – "of a wealthy trader. Security is tight. The good news is, they're planning an addition to the house and before long a lot of construction vehicles will be coming and going. Be patient. We're working hard to figure things out."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed," said John.

Abubakr decided to omit telling John about the clinic. Fake phone number, fake address, even a fake country. The Emirate of Surgery? Come on, now. It was a critical link in a major syndicate, providing castrations, revirginizations, devocalizations, strategic amputations, sex change operations, and multiple other sordid services. Dr. Hassan was a much-feared kingpin, a particularly heinous "specialty livestock" broker to princes, brothels, and private collectors. It sickened him to think that Bulbul had fallen into his clutches.

The guard had told them that she seemed to be in good condition, though, and while Sheikh Khalid didn't have the reputation of being kinky, he did admit to having a thing for voluptuous Swedes. Now, Abubakr had seen pictures of Bulbul. While she was a very, very pretty girl, voluptuous wasn't what would spring to mind.

Construction should start soon. Then they could strategize on how to get her out.

Tammy got little sleep, worrying that Sheikh Khalid would send for her, trying to come up with other plans to escape, thinking about that terrifying whip downstairs. After her third almost sleepless night she caught a look at herself in Leyla's mirror. She looked thirty, not eighteen, with ugly bruise-colored circles under her eyes, stringy un-kempt hair, and so many pimples she looked like she had chicken pox. This is horrible, she thought, I can't let this *happen*.

The grand scale was still beyond her comprehension; the bite-size problems were what galled her. Control her temper while the bratty twins threw marbles at her. Not scream when for the umpteenth time Oum Mohammed made her hold her yarn. No lipstick. No chocolate bars. No phone chats with Elaine. No Redskins games with Marc. No silly jokes from Dad. No chocolate brownies. The wrong brand of shampoo. No Diet Cokes. No mall. No pop rock stations – indeed, no radio or TV at all; Sheikh Khalid

did not approve of them. No onion rings. No tee-shirts and jeans. Her vomit-splattered Gucci had vanished into the laundry and had never reappeared; she had to wear a faded blue-flowered ankle-length hand-me-down that was too tight through the shoulders and clung to her sweaty body like wet leaves. Every morning when she put it on she thought of her bulging closet back in Bethesda, and she'd want to cry.

It was another bad day when she discovered that the suitcases of clothes she thought belonged to her turned out to be for Leyla. Dr. Hassan had lied to her again! Leyla made a point to prance around in "her" outfits, while Tammy was consumed by humiliation. It was faint consolation that Leyla's pregnancy made it impossible for her to wear some of the clothes right away, and ruined the effect with the others.

Oum Mohammed was showing more and more suspicion about Tammy's insistence on clomping around in her high-heeled shoes. Tammy noticed, but without them, she knew she'd never even get across the broiling stones in the courtyard. On the thirteenth day she was in the living room holding Oum Mohammed's yarn when the mistress of the harem motioned for her to take them off. Tammy pretended that she didn't understand. Zeynab reached over, grabbed them, and handed them to Oum Mohammed. The money, of course, fell out. Oum Mohammed turned the bill over in her hand, put it in her pocket, and bore a hole right through Tammy with a reprimanding glare.

There, just like that, went Escape Plans A to Z.

The last screw that held her composure together came loose. Part of her stepped back horror-stricken, while the rest of her jumped up and ran out of the room. "I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you!" she screamed, not caring who heard or who understood. "A plague on you, every last damned one of you!"

The twins followed her, giggling and pointing. "You snotty brats, leave me the hell alone!" She slammed the door. It wouldn't stay shut. Oh damn, she thought, can't I even have a shred of privacy without being locked in? The twins were still heckling her. "I said, get the hell away from me!" They may not have understood the words but they sure understood the music, because their eyes opened wide and they took off down the hall like their spoiled little rears were on fire.

You see? carped the demons. You'll never find a way to escape now that you're barefoot and penniless. Soon you'll be pregnant like everyone else.

She cried for an hour. Everyone left her alone, and eventually there was nothing to do but calm down. Hope? Just a flickering candle in a hurricane.

Next day she ventured back into the living room, where a smirking Leyla was wearing one of the designer outfits. Really rubbing it in. Then, Leyla "accidentally" spilled a whole glassful of grape juice down the front of Tammy's only dress.

She leapt to her feet, ready for war. At five-eight Tammy towered over Leyla by several inches, even though she was now barefoot and Leyla was in high heels. Oum Mohammed dropped a stitch. Oum Hussein pricked her finger. Even the twins stopped and gawked. Tammy was spun far beyond fury into a windless plain where nothing existed except Leyla and her. She was cold. Calm. At her most dangerous. "Don't. You. Dare."

Nervous silence. Leyla flounced out. The twins resumed demolishing their toy truck. Oum Mohammed briefly shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Rokhiya almost smiled.

Next day everybody trooped downstairs and started putting on their cloaks and veils, even, to Tammy's astonishment, Rokhiya's elder daughter Amina, who was only about ten. An outing! But Oum Mohammed said something to Zeynab and Haifa, whose faces fell, and they put their veils and Tammy's

back on the hooks. They were dis-appointed; Tammy was shattered. She'd been there fifteen days and, except for her one brief foray, not once had she been able to set foot outside those high walls. She was tired of looking at the world through latticed windows. She wanted to feel the sun on her face. She sat glumly on a window-seat in a small third-story salon overlooking the garden, where Sheikh Khalid and two other men sipped coffee and traded laughs, as if life were perfectly normal.

She wasn't paying much attention to the men until she heard a familiar chuckle. She froze. Next to Sheikh Khalid was a strikingly handsome man with a silvery laugh. He was broad-shouldered, with a streak of white cutting through his thick black hair like a blaze of platinum set in onyx. She sucked in her breath. If she'd wound up in *his* harem, she might not have so much of a problem. The third man was partially obscured by a bush, but he laughed again, and this time there was no mistaking Dr. Hassan. No! With tears stinging her eyes she turned away from the window. He'd laughed loud on purpose, she figured, just so she could hear him from her dismal prison.

Not long after everybody else got back, hair smelling of smoky incense, she was surprised to be summoned before Oum Mohammed, who handed her a folded sheet of paper. A note? For her? She felt a sudden rush of hope.

My golden treasure,
I want to thank you for being so cooperative. My brother Fuad, my cousin "Sgt." Nabil
and I hope that Sheikh Khalid finds you pleasing and that over the years you will bear
him many handsome sons.

Yours always,
Dr. Hassan

The bastard! Did he have to be so cruel? She ripped the note into tiny confetti, stomped on the pieces, and flushed them down the toilet.

As heartless as the note was, however, it marked a turning point. She was determined to show the man with the mask of a matinee idol and the soul of Judas that she could handle whatever he threw her way. Maybe she wouldn't have picked this place to live, but as Haifa had reminded her, it could certainly be a lot worse, and she'd show him she could do perfectly well wherever he dumped her.

She'd finally concluded that her chances of escape were virtually nil, and for the first time actually opened a mental file on how she'd adapt to the harem. She remembered her English teacher's favorite comeback when someone would say, "I think I'm doing all right under the circumstances." She'd slide her glasses down to the end of her nose and challenge, "And just what are you doing *under there?*"

She still had Dr. Hassan's card, and she pulled it out from its hiding place behind the cushions of the settee and memorized his ad-dress. One day, she thought, she was going to turn him in, and she wanted to be ready. That tiny act improved her morale immeasurably.

"*Ya Taamm!*"

Oum Mohammed. Tammy pasted a brave smile on her face and decided grandly that no matter what, she'd hold her head up high. The paragon of long-suffering nobility. Distant. Dignified. Majestic. Cinderella had ended up with a prince, right? She caught a glimpse of her faded dress and bare feet, and gulped.

The dratted yarn again. This time, though, instead of glowering in resentment, she pinned a noble smile on her face. Oum Mohammed looked searchingly at her, as if trying to figure out her angle, but she seemed relieved, and she caught the lady smiling at her softly a few times. She's not a bad person at all,

Tammy told herself. A young woman is brought into the harem, destined for her husband's bed, and she manages to be nice? It was hard not to respect her tolerant heart.

The next days showed improvements on all fronts. She still felt foreign, stupid, scared, and utterly out of place, but less like an alien who'd been parachuted in from outer space.

Learning to survive in her new surroundings was one thing; be-coming blasé was something else. It shook her to the core when she noticed that she'd forgotten to be offended at eating leftovers. On the other hand, she figured it was wasted effort to get upset about some-thing she was powerless to change.

Sometimes, in fact, even leftovers weren't hard to take. There was one dish, tabbouleh, the men didn't seem to care for too much, a heav-enly salad of chopped parsley and bulgur wheat and lemon juice, so there was always plenty.

"*Laziz?*" Oum Mohammed inquired, smacking her lips.

"*Laziz!*" You bet it was yummy.

"*Laziz jiddan?*" She held her arms wide.

"*Laziz jiddan!*" Really yummy.

From that day on, she always made sure Tammy had an extra helping.

Almost in spite of herself, Tammy was growing to like her. Oum Mohammed often went to extra effort to be kind. If she'd been one ounce less of a lady Tammy honestly did not know how she could have managed.

One morning, Oum Mohammed sent for Haifa and Tammy and gave them Tammy's housekeeping assignments. Laundry, carrying in heavy cans of water, vacuuming, working through a huge pile of mend-ing...

Haifa motioned for her to come to the courtyard with her. "Let me show you how to use the washing machine."

It was probably from the 1950's and even had a wringer. Tammy had to laugh. If they could afford to buy a fleet of Maseratis and a stableful of thoroughbreds, they could afford a modern washing ma-chine. But why waste money when a mere *woman* would use it?

She soon got the hang of the washer and actually enjoyed being outside hanging the clothes in the bright sunlight. The ironing board, however, was in a windowless corner of the basement. Wait a minute. Iron? Did anybody ever iron *anything* anymore?

"What are you going to do now that you're not stuck with the laundry?" she inquired of Haifa.

"I'm still the personal maid for Rokhiya and Leyla, and now they want me to clean out the storage room that looks like it hasn't been reorganized since about 1600. And oh, by the way, your buzz is two short, one long, and two short. When you hear it, you drop everything, and report immediately to Oum Mohammed."

"So, you don't have to watch me all the time now."

"You're barefoot now, and settling in."

On the twenty-second day, soon after lunch, Tammy was working on her fourth load of laundry when the buzzer sounded. One long; that meant it was from Sheikh Khalid. Two short, one long, and two short. She hesitated, then it hit her. This was it.

She turned off the iron and went upstairs. Oum Mohammed took off her glasses. “*Ya Taamm.*”

She’d spent three weeks dreading this moment. It was like Grand-ma Caldwell. Everyone knew she was going to die and did their best to prepare, but when it happened they were destroyed anyway. Do the wash, okay, but let that old geezer put his paws all over her?

There went her lunch, all over the carpet.

Oh Grandma, she thought, suddenly remembering her warning, why didn’t I pay attention to you? You were right about Jean-Paul; he strangled his new girlfriend only a few months after you told me to break up with him. But I thought, what could possibly be dangerous about a vacation in France? You went to all that trouble to come to me, and I should’ve listened. I really, really should have listened.

Oum Mohammed summoned Zeynab to clean up the mess. Then she squeezed Tam’s hand. Her look said, you’ll live, so there’s no need to be such a baby.

Tam thought she’d be immediately escorted to the big house, but no, the entire afternoon was spent getting her ready. Carefully bathed and depilated, creamed and oiled to the point she could have slid all the way across the courtyard, nails manicured, hair shampooed and brushed until it glistened. Then her eyes were made up with kohl, and henna paste was applied to her hands and feet, staining them brick red. Haifa turned out to be quite the artist and drew trailing vines up her legs and around her middle. The hard part was lying stock-still for nearly an hour while the paste dried.

Then Oum Mohammed picked out her dress: a long navy caftan practically covered in silver embroidery. It was splendid, and set off her blue eyes and pale ash-blonde hair to perfection. Her complexion resembled a bad embalming job; she needn’t have worried, though, since she later learned that Arabs consider pasty skin particularly attractive.

She stared at her reflection as if it were a stranger’s. Three months from graduation? Less than five months since the prom? It couldn’t possibly be the same person. Zeynab thoughtfully slipped her a tranquilizer. Tammy wished it’d been a dozen.

Everybody started rooting around for just the right jewelry. Leyla was really in her element on this score and to Tammy’s amazement, was suddenly helpful and friendly. She had never been so covered with silver. Chains dripping with turquoise beads for her forehead. Lavish chandelier earrings, necklaces, bracelets. She thought there wasn’t room for another single bead, but Leyla rustled around and pulled out some jingly things to put around her ankles. She’d take a step, ka-chink. It was like playing with the veil in the limo; it felt so strange she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Zeynab spritzed her with perfume, and suddenly the whole room smelled of roses and lemon and jasmine. Oum Mohammed adjusted one of the necklaces, stepped back, and nodded.

Sweet little Najab, who’d been darting in and out excitedly and who’d insisted on “helping” with Tammy’s hair, tipped her curly head to one side and gave her the one Arabic compliment she could understand. “*Laziz jiddan,*” she proclaimed, and everybody, including Tam-my, burst out laughing.

At length another buzzer sounded. Zeynab squirted her with more perfume. Veil in place, Haifa and Zeynab escorted her to the harem gate, where Suleyman and another guard took over.

The back hallway of the men's house was magnificent. The ceiling was domed, supported by graceful scalloped arches. It looked like a combination mosque and museum, with bands of tiled calligraphy circling the walls. Thick rugs of rich colors and impossibly intricate patterns. The air conditioning worked. So did the lights. Of course, this was where the *men* lived. The guards whisked her through palatial travertine hallways hung with heavy tapestries and abstract paintings. At length they motioned her through a padded brocade door.

She swallowed. This was it. Survival, survival, she reminded her-self. Be sweet to him, and you'll be okay.

Sheikh Khalid was waiting for her, propped up on pillows on a pale blue silk-draped bed, smiling like a five-year-old ready to unwrap a Christmas present. The room was so garish it was almost laughable. Approximately the size of Lafayette Square, it contained four or five living areas, an oasis of palm trees, and even a ten-foot waterfall. An arched bridge was covered with blue-flowering trellises.

A tuxedoed butler guided her toward the sheikh.

"*Kom,*" Sheikh Khalid said, still smiling, holding out his hand. Wearing a royal blue silk robe, he rose from the bed, sat on an ornate couch, and patted the seat next to him. He said something to the butler, who removed her veil and served them spiced coffee called *gawaha* in little gold-rimmed porcelain cups. Tammy focused on the big-beaked coffee pot that reminded her of a toucan. "*Skal!*" he said, quite unexpectedly. Then a thin wrinkled hand reached under the dress and fondled her thigh.

She flinched, but only a little. Smile. Be nice. Control yourself.

"Giuseppe?" he said. She thought that meant that the butler would leave, but no, he started removing the jewelry, then the dress. Giuseppe looked at her and turned a funny shade of gray, while the sheikh rattled on in a language that Tammy didn't understand.

"*Det ar battre,*" he said, when everything was gone except for her anklets. She shivered from confusion, fright, and from the extremely cold air conditioning. She'd almost thought he was speaking German, but as he chattered away, she concluded it wasn't German at all. And she realized he was expecting answers. *Ja, mein herr* seemed to satisfy him a couple of times, but she knew she couldn't keep up the charade for very long. Swedish! Of course!

Then two things happened simultaneously: he figured out that she didn't understand a thing he was saying, and he took a good look at her.

He jumped to his feet, screaming. He shook her until her teeth rattled. Then he took her little cup and hurled it against a palm tree. It shattered, sending tiny gold-flecked remains raining down like sparkling fireworks. Sheikh Khalid slumped into a chair, holding his head in his hands, suddenly looking very old indeed. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"*Hal anti min sued?*" She panicked. Oh! Sweden! The question sounded like a death knell. Are you from Sweden?

"*Laa, ya sayid. Anaa min Amrikiya.*" No sir, I'm from America."

Then the light dawned: he was the old man with the special order, and he thought she was Marisa! Had Dr. Hassan really thought they could get away with passing her off as the voluptuous Swede? *Her?*

He closed his eyes in anguish. Then, having reached a decision, he called for Giuseppe, muttering under his breath. She caught *toubib* – doctor. Oh brother, she thought, I sure am glad I'm not the one who tried to pull a dirty trick on someone like Sheikh Khalid. She wished she could tell him she'd be glad to offer her assistance if he ever decided to commit murder.

Giuseppe appeared. The sheikh said something, and the butler grabbed her arm and bundled her out the door.

Damn, she thought, he's *fired* me. I don't even have the proper qualifications to be a harem slave. How far downhill can I go?

He took her to the basement to a small windowless room furnished with a bare metal cot and a toilet. The jail cell. He took off her foot-jinglies, slammed the metal door, and turned the key.

She lay awake most of the night, wondering what men did in S&M and fetish clubs, what happened in snuff clubs. Her dad was fond of saying, *Cheer up, baby, things could always get worse. So I cheered up, and sure enough, they got worse.* Haifa's terrifying words came back to her. "There's always somewhere worse, and they make sure you know that." She eventually sobbed herself to sleep.