

## CHAPTER SIX

# Escape

{BANGKOK: SUVARNABHUMI AIRPORT  
SATURDAY, JANUARY 5, 9 P.M.}

**W**hen I realized I had walked into a trap, my sense of freedom and relief vanished. Reality crushed my happy dream of escaping the abuse of my family, the injustice of my country and a future that meant being tethered in marriage to an old man who would have absolute control of my life until I died. Being murdered by my father and brothers for daring to run away was another truth that I knew I would face. How else could I explain the early-morning departure from the hotel in Kuwait while my family slept, or the ticket I'd purchased for the flight from Kuwait to Bangkok, or the valid Australian tourist visa stored in my phone? My plan was so carefully prepared; I'd stay a few days in Bangkok at a hotel I had already booked and then fly to Melbourne, where another Saudi runaway would meet me. I'd ask for asylum as soon as I made it to the other side of the arrivals area, and my new life would begin.

Instead I was trapped here in the airport. My fear was like

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a hot white light exploding in my brain. I was shaking and sweating; I could see my future becoming unravelled, my own life ending. The people in front of me—the man I'd foolishly presumed was being kind to me, the woman who wouldn't look at a terrified girl—they froze as images in a horror movie while my brain slipped into slow motion and the past and present collided. As much as I felt like an animal who'd been caught in car headlights, the survivor in me knew I had to calm down and figure out what to do next. I was quite sure they were going to arrest me and send me back. I needed to figure out how to get in the way of that plan.

The Thai man, who turned out to be an agent of the Saudi embassy and who I now considered the enemy, told me to sit down on a chair near the passport control counter. My passport was in his hands. I was trying to decide between begging him to help me and attacking him so I could run into the main part of the airport. He clamped his hand on my arm and led me to the chair, where I sat for fifteen minutes that felt like fifteen hours. I was scanning the room around me, wondering which person might help. While I sat there the face of Dina Ali came to my mind. She's a Saudi girl who ran away, just as I did. She was trying to get to Australia but was stopped in the Philippines, just the way I was stopped here. The official took her passport as well as her phone because her ticket was on it. She spoke to another woman in the airport, a Canadian tourist, and told her she was in danger, that her family would kill her, and asked if she could use the woman's phone. Between them they contacted every organization they could think of—human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations, the Manila police, the Manila newspapers—but they couldn't get through. The officials at the airport said

they had received a call from a very important person in Saudi Arabia who told them to hold her documents and not allow her to leave. She posted a message on the internet that read:

*My name is Dina Ali and I'm a Saudi woman who fled Saudi Arabia to Australia to seek asylum. I stopped in Philippines for transit. They took my passport and block me for 13 hours just because I am a Saudi woman. With the collaboration of the Saudi Embassy, if my family come, they will kill me. If I go back to Saudi Arabia I will be dead. Please help me. I'm recording this video to help me and know that I'm real and here.*

The Philippines airport officials said they had called her family, and sure enough two men turned up at the airport saying they were her uncles. And that they would take care of her. She was screaming in the airport, saying that the man who was insisting to officials that he was her family and had come to take her home was not her father; she was begging airport officials and tourists in the airport to help her. But no one helped her. The uncles left and a seemingly sympathetic lawyer arrived and told her not to worry, that he would get her passport and documents back and she should come with him. The Canadian woman who had stuck with her throughout this ordeal figured Dina was safe and bade her farewell. But this was a total trick. The so-called lawyer was a Saudi handler. The incredible thing is that no one in these airports understands the peril a runaway girl from Saudi Arabia is in. Everyone in the world knows that the status of women and girls in Saudi is life-threatening. The international community knows what goes on—I read their reports on illegal internet

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sites. Heads of state are aware as well. So why isn't there a hotline to call? Why is it airport officials have the power to hand a girl over to certain death? I had seen the video footage of what happened to Dina Ali next when I was still at home in Ha'il, looking at social media sites. A passenger in the departure lounge recorded the shocking abduction of an innocent woman. They had taped her ankles together, placed tape over her mouth, tied her to a wheelchair and thrown a blanket over her while she struggled and squirmed and was pushed through the departure lounge and onto a Saudi plane. To this day no one has heard from her and no one knows where she is.

I figured I was about to face the same fate. I sat in the chair, wondering what would happen next, what I could do to save myself. Then I saw a collection of men strutting toward me. The Thai man and five security guards, along with another man who looked Arabic, were walking toward me like a gang of executioners. Even before they reached me, I knew what had happened: my family had awakened, realized I was on the run, called my father, and he had used his power and influence to call the airport authorities and instruct them to set a trap for me. I thought, *This is it; my life will end, they're going to put handcuffs on me, they're going to take me.*

They were walking to where I was sitting—I stood up and stepped backwards. I didn't speak a word, but I'm sure the immense apprehension and almost paralyzing fear I felt were showing on my face as I backed away from them, still trying to concoct a getaway plan. That's when they told me the truth: there was an alert from the Saudi embassy about me, submitted by my family. The Thai man said he was there as a mediator for the Saudi embassy and it was his job to take me back home. The Arabic-looking man, who was actually

Kuwaiti, said he was working for the Kuwaiti airline. I knew instantly that I wanted to expose them; I wanted someone to know what was happening, because this was inhumane. A young girl, obviously terrified, was about to be set upon by seven men. I felt I was in the hands of a Mafia gang.

I was also remembering what the Saudis did to Jamal Khashoggi. He was the Saudi Arabian dissident who dared to speak out against the crown prince and the king about the lack of human rights in the country. I followed his story on the illegal internet sites where I learned everything else about my country. Khashoggi was constantly criticizing Saudi Arabia in the column he wrote for the *Washington Post* and during his regular appearances on the Al-Arab news channel, and he had to leave his homeland in fear for his life the year before I bolted. He was getting married and needed documents for the ceremony and went to the Saudi embassy in Istanbul to get them. He was never seen again. Later it was proven that he was murdered inside the embassy; his body was dismembered and removed from the embassy by a team of hit men who flew from the kingdom to Istanbul to assassinate him. A year later, just six weeks before I fled, I read on social media that even though the royal family admitted he'd been killed, no one had been held responsible. I remember seeing his face on my phone and thinking what a friendly, smiling man he was, and there were photos of the woman he was going to marry; she was waiting outside the embassy, patiently waiting for the man she loved who never came back out the door. I was taken by that photo—it was caught on the security camera. She looked so alone, probably happy and full of plans for the future at first, but later . . . I wonder how long she stood there before sounding the alarm. I looked at that photo when

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I read about his murder and thought, *Her happiness is dashed*. But even the worry she must have been feeling was nothing compared to the horrific truth she would eventually know.

Standing there staring down the gang of thugs in front of me, I wondered if I would end up like Jamal Khashoggi or Dina Ali, kidnapped and killed or disappeared.

The men stood there together, watching me, speaking to each other behind their hands. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I decided to videotape them while recording my own voice saying, "The embassy has stopped me." I sent the video to a friend of mine. Although I didn't have time to post everything, at least I got that much out so someone would know where I was and what had happened. I was trying to put on a confident face in front of these men, but the truth is I was nearly hysterical at this point. I didn't know what I should do. In all the careful planning I'd done, there was no backup calculation for this. I contemplated running away, jumping over the customs barrier where my chair was and dashing into the main part of the airport and asking for help from a crew member of a foreign airline—a Western airline—thinking they would be humanitarians. What should I do? Was the future really out of my hands? Submitting to them seemed like a bad idea. My suitcase was still in checked baggage. The Thai man had my passport. I had my backpack. I decided to run. I had no clue where I was going but hoped I would find an exit and get to the city, where I could disappear. The Thai man came toward me. I ran at him as hard as I could and pushed him backwards with one hand and tried to grab my passport from him with my other hand. I got it. Immediately I hid it in my jeans because I knew he wouldn't dare touch me to try to get it. The security guards had anticipated the

direction I would go and hopped over the barrier to cut me off. They were coming at me from both sides now, so I stopped running. The Thai agent looked nervous and the other six men gathered around me, forming a circle that I knew I could not penetrate.

Once I was surrounded, the Kuwaiti man said something that astonished me: "I wasn't expecting you to be wearing clothes like this when the plane landed." So, he had been watching for me, monitoring the footage on a camera at arrivals, looking for a woman wearing an abaya and niqab. "I thought you would look like a Saudi Arabian woman," he said. I thought to myself, *Why would he be monitoring the camera, and how many people does he follow like this?* Then he told me, "You look normal. Why did your dad tell me you are sick and need treatment for mental illness?" I was stunned, absolutely shaken by this remark, and asked him, "Did my father say that?" He said, "Yes," and he showed me a text on WhatsApp that my dad had sent him—it was a faked patient folder from the mental hospital saying I was mentally ill. And it included my photo so I would be easily recognized as soon as I arrived in the airport. Suddenly I froze. Goosebumps popped up all over my body. I felt everything around me go dark, and I remembered what my dad had said about my sister Reem the night she tried to run away. At the time, none of us had understood what she was accusing our father of. How could the father of a girl commit such a terrible atrocity? We all agreed that poor Reem was suffering from an anxiety that we didn't know about. The details of that terrible night and the days that followed were flooding my mind as I absorbed what this Kuwaiti man was telling me. When Reem tried to tell my family the awful things our father had allegedly done to

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her, he said she was mentally ill; he sent her to the psychiatric hospital and she was silenced by drugs that wrecked her mind. When she came home, she was like a zombie. We'd needed to take care of her ever since. Standing there in the airport I suddenly understood what Reem had said that night. What my father had done. I also now believed that by claiming she was mentally ill and sending her to the psychiatric hospital, he had effectively condemned her to a life of dependency on mind-destroying drugs. I even began to wonder if those in charge of her care had been paid off. Shame, shame, shame on this man who believes in the code of honour.

I composed myself and tried to convince the Kuwaiti man that my father was powerful enough to put me in an institution and ruin my life. It was obvious this man sympathized with me and I was certain he didn't believe what my father said. So I couldn't understand why he didn't want to help me. Was he just another man who believed girls were expendable and that there was nothing he could do to change that ancient fact? I felt helpless, caught in the sinister hands of powerful people who have authority. And at that moment I surrendered and gave up my plan to get away; my dream to live freely was in ruins. I stood there feeling dismayed, thinking, *It's over. I'm being sent back.* I sat down in the chair, picturing my return home and preparing myself for the reality that my life would end. I felt sure my father would kill me. I wondered if he would kill me right away or hide me from the world where no one would hear about me or find me ever again. I wanted to cry but for some reason tears did not come. I don't know how I remained so strong on the outside despite the turmoil inside me. My mind was flashing to the future, to the consequences I would pay for my attempted escape; I was even sitting there



on the airport chair hoping that after I vanished I wouldn't be forgotten. I wanted someone to know my story.

After a while, I don't know how long, I stopped caring about my failed plan and fell into a fog. I wasn't focusing on anything when I heard words that turned everything around. The Thai man said the trip back to Kuwait would be in two days and they would put me in a hotel here in the airport to wait for that flight. What? Two days? A hotel? I could hardly believe my ears—and I actually thought, *THERE IS STILL HOPE*. I was sure this was a sign to fight for my life and my freedom. Instead of figuring out the next step, I went on instinct and decided to make a run for it again. I was running in all directions, trying to get away from those men and shouting, "Help me" to anyone who would listen. I turned on my phone and recorded my pleas and the responses from tourists, shopkeepers, airport officials who kept looking at me as though I was acting out or being a typical teenager or simply a problem best ignored. Here's a recording with one airport official:

ME: Please help me.

OFFICIAL: Your visa is not granted.

ME: But I'm in danger.

OFFICIAL: Yeah? How?

ME: Yes, it is so dangerous to me.

OFFICIAL: What do you mean "so dangerous to you"?

ME: Saudi Arabia is dangerous for me, so I can't go back.

OFFICIAL: You have to wait for the Kuwait plane. It does not go to Saudi Arabia. You came here on a Kuwait plane so you will leave on a Kuwait plane. You can't stay here.

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The conversation was ludicrous. But it was evidence that just as the airport officials in the Philippines refused to help Dina Ali, this guy had no interest in helping me.

That was the end of the conversation because the security goon had caught up with me, pushed me backwards so hard he hurt my chest, and then dragged me back to where I'd been sitting while I kept yelling for help. People noticed me, looked at me, but nobody helped me. Nobody. Then I was taken to an office in the lower level of the airport. I was watching carefully, looking for a way out. I saw a door that led to the outside of the airport, to the street. The door was open; I could see the sidewalk, the road and the sky. How could I get myself through that door? I kept staring at it, trying to memorize the location, recording the images on either side of the door, hoping I could find a way to ditch my minders and get back there and make a run for it. The Kuwaiti man saw me and laughed when he said, "Don't even think of running away. If you embarrass the Saudi embassy, you will regret it." A veiled threat. I thought again of Jamal Khashoggi.

Once in the office on the lower level of the airport, I made a strategic error. They asked me to sign papers in the Thai language and to show them my passport as I signed them because they needed additional information. Maybe my fatigue level was surfacing or maybe I was preoccupied, but I let my guard down and pulled the document from the pocket in my jeans. Like a coiled-up snake making a strike, the Thai man suddenly leapt toward me and snatched my passport and tucked it away in his pocket. The look of triumph on his face was pitiful to me—here was a grown man tricking a scared girl in a foreign place and rendering her helpless. He reinforced everything I had learned about men:

they will do anything to anyone to save face, to look like winners in front of other men when in fact they have broken the laws of decency.

We left the office, walking like a marching band of seven men and one young girl into the main halls of the airport, which were filled with shops and washrooms and crowds of people carrying their luggage. I asked the Thai man to give me back my passport. He said he would give it back to me in two days when my flight was ready for departure and I was in the boarding lounge. As we walked along, the Kuwaiti man started acting like we were old friends, chatting with me and telling me that my cousin was a friend of his and they all work at the airport. I was trying to compute this information and wondered if this was how it worked—that my father had called my cousin and the string of commands and threats went through him, so the Kuwait Airways people feared retribution from my father and, rather than doing their job to protect their passengers, they capitulated and did my father's bidding.

I was still trying to put all that together when he said, "Your father is going to call me. Do you want to talk to him?" I said, "No, never." He said, "What about your older brother?" I was crying at this point and agreed that I would talk to Mutlaq. When I heard his voice on the phone I told him, "I'm sorry. I swear all I wanted and planned for was to leave in peace without anyone noticing." He said "Why?" I told him, "I cannot explain because you're not going to understand me or side with me. My problem is with the Saudi regulations and laws, not with our family." He said, "Okay, you're going to live in Kuwait after this." I told him, "I don't believe what you're saying. For three years I was asking both you and Mom

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to at least allow me to study in a different city than our city, and you refused, so how are you going to allow me to live outside Saudi Arabia?" I was sure he was lying; this brother Mutlaq who studies in a different city, he would likely do anything at all to capture me and drag me back to my fate. But family ties are powerful. So even though Mutlaq had been despicably mean to me, even cruel, hearing his familiar voice on the phone when I was being held by strange people in a foreign land really wrenched my heart. Now I was crying so hard that I could hardly speak. My brother seemed emotional as well; his voice started to sound as though he was about to cry himself. He promised me that nothing would happen to me and said he would be waiting with everybody to welcome me in the Kuwait airport when my flight landed. I asked, "Who is everybody?" He said, "Me, your father and the Saudi embassy." I figured this was another trap and said, "Are you kidding? Why is the embassy going to welcome me?" He said, "For your safety." Whatever smidgen of trust I had in my brother evaporated instantly. I disconnected the phone and decided I couldn't trust anybody.

By now I was so emotionally distraught that my nose started bleeding all over my clothes. I remember the looks of the people passing by; they seemed to be scared and avoided making eye contact with me while I was crying, gulping, gasping and holding my shirt to my nose to stop the bleeding. *Why don't they stop and ask if I need help? How can they look the other way? What's wrong with people that they are so busy minding their own business they can witness a kidnapping and fail to act?* The Kuwaiti man rushed to my side and asked me about the blood. He thought I was trying to harm myself. I said, "It's just a nosebleed."

We arrived at the airport hotel—aptly named the Miracle Transit Hotel—and I was told I would stay here until my departure. The Kuwaiti guy pointed to one of the security men and said he would be on guard in the lobby to make sure I didn't try to run away. With that warning he handed me the key to my room and pointed to the hall I should follow to get there. He and the Thai agent and another man I didn't recognize from the Bangkok airport were all in the lobby, watching me while I walked to my room. I saw them because I was examining every nook and cranny, even looking over my shoulder to where they were standing, checking every door, trying to find an exit I could run to. I opened the door to the room slowly, entered, and started trying to figure out if it was safe or not. The wall was glass from floor to ceiling; I could look out and see the interior of the airport but not outside. I thought how scary this place was, how easy it would be for them to incarcerate me here. I felt trapped. Even if I screamed, no one would be able to hear me. I thought, *I can break that glass and get out; on the other hand, someone could break it and get in.*

I sat in the room and started tweeting about my situation—where I was, what was happening. “I am the girl who escaped Kuwait to Thailand,” I wrote. “My life is at stake and I am now in real danger if I am forced to return to Saudi Arabia.” At first, I hesitated to publish my photo and full name. I was tweeting to my runaway friends in Australia, Canada and Sweden; one of them said I should post a video of myself and say my name so the world would believe this was real, that it was really happening. I had to think about the consequences of doing that. I dropped offline for two hours. Although my absence from Twitter made everyone worry, I needed to get hold of myself. I had to decide whether or not

to post my picture. This was a very big decision. I was sitting on the floor of the hotel room. My heart was beating very fast and I was breathing fast, too fast—panting, gasping for breath and trembling—and I wanted to cry. I was really scared of posting my name and photo because of how my people back home—my family, friends, relatives and neighbours would react. I was also afraid that posting my name and face would mean I'd lose freedom in another way. If people know who you are, there are restrictions on your life, people expect things of you. I wanted to be free and safe.

Many people lent their help by amplifying my voice online. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian American journalist and social activist based in New York City, saw my tweets in Arabic and translated them into English. Along with Mona, it was my three friends from the secret network that stuck with me throughout my ordeal in Kuwait and then in Bangkok who convinced me I needed to take a risk and show my face on social media. They basically said, "Say your name and show your face or you're going to die."

I thought about the consequences and finally decided that the world should know I exist; if anyone was going to help me, they needed to know who and where I was. So I made the decision to publish my picture and full name.

I discovered almost immediately that my networkers were right—that action got me the attention I needed from human rights groups and the media. Mona Eltahawy continued to translate my tweets and told the Twitter world how much trouble I was in. She tweeted, "Rahaf's father is a governor in #Saudi Arabia. He is a powerful man. She has requested asylum and fears for her life. She has said she fears her family will kill her if she is returned to Saudi Arabia."

I also posted this video on Twitter: "My name is Rahaf Mohammed. I am 18 years old. I can't do anything because they have my passport, and tomorrow they will force me to go back to Kuwait. . . . Please help me. They will kill me."

Twitter lit up immediately with responses from all over the world.

The Saudis really know how to let their world standing dip to the lowest of the low. Twitter has done some great things this week—and highlighting your plight is one of them. Without your phone, the truth could not have been told. Keep going Rahaf.

They don't care. It's never had consequences before and it likely won't have any real consequences now. The west is still more than happy to arm them and hopelessly addicted to their oil. Nobody in power seems willing to truly confront them.

So any future survivors trying to escape should take note and have spare phones hidden on their person, under their clothes or in luggage somewhere [sic] safe . . .

No, better to have people waiting in transit airports that you can trust.

Announcements such as this make the citizen lose confidence in any government entity and in any embassy and consulate, as if they were one gang working against the citizen. [translated from Arabic]

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Saudi Arabia is basically Gilead. I wish you all the best and that many others have the chance to follow you to a better life. The UK government should hang its heads in shame for it's [sic] support of this regime.

You know what disturbs me: I only see men in the video, talking about a woman, telling what she should do.  
#SaveRahaf

This is horrible, but you're bringing attention to the awful behavior of others and shedding light on it for the entire world to see. You're making a difference not in your own life, but in the lives of other women. Stay safe.

You're a smart girl Rahaf! Stay ahead of the game...always a couple of steps ahead...

I also received a lot of attacks from people in Saudi Arabia cursing me when I declared I was giving up Islam. They wanted to stop me, wanted me dead. Even people outside Saudi Arabia in the Arabic world who were Muslim threatened to kill me because I was trying to break the shackles for women looking for a better life in a better society.

Many journalists from the *New York Times* and from Sydney, Australia, and the UK contacted me, and I gave them the details about being held like a prisoner in a hotel room in Bangkok so that my situation would be spread in the Western world as well. I posted the essence of my story—they put me in a room, they took my passport, my father will kill me, I want to get away. I posted all that and also said, "I'm going to stop eating until I find help and UNHCR [United Nations



High Commissioner for Refugees] comes here to help me." I was more frightened than ever before in my life. All I could think was, *What if they break down the door and enter my room and kidnap me because I was talking on social media? What if my outburst online and not being silent angered them?* I didn't only take on my family, I took on the authorities too. They were the people who could ruin my life.

With all this running like a tickertape through my mind, I decided I had to try again—to leave the room, to ask for help or to try to run away. I left my room barefoot so I could run faster and went into the airport area and found the guard who was supposed to be watching me—he was asleep. I left my backpack in the room but had my phone. I walked to the arrival area and followed the passengers, hoping I could follow them out of the airport without having to pass through a checkpoint like customs, hoping I could get away before someone spotted me. I even thought of breaking a window to get out. But nothing was working; I could not find a way. I knew it was an impossible and crazy idea but I had to try something, and so in desperation I once again turned on the recorder on my phone and went from one uniformed official to the next, asking for help; I even went up to tourists and told them my story and asked them to help me. I asked shopkeepers too, everyone I came across. I knew no one had the authority to help me; most of them couldn't even understand a scared, barefoot, crying girl explaining she's going to die if she is returned to Kuwait. People made excuses. They walked away from me. I found an airport employee, someone who would understand me; he told me I should return as ordered to my country. I insisted he call the Thai police. He refused and told me to go back to my room and wait for my flight.

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Everyone in this whole airport seemed to know enough about my story to stop me from getting help. My hopes were diminishing fast. I thought maybe I could find a hiding place in the airport so that when the plane left, it would leave without me. I roamed around the hotel looking everywhere, but I could not find a way out that wasn't guarded. I even tried to remember the location of that room in the lower level, but all the images I'd tried to record in my mind about where it was eluded me.

After a while I felt my search mission was starting to look like the actions of an escapee and attracting the sort of attention I didn't want. So finally I decided to go back to the room, past the sleeping guard. But even in the room, I didn't feel safe. There were people knocking at my door telling me I should eat. That just jacked up my fear; I thought, *What if they want to poison me?* I decided to post the videos of me talking, actually begging people in the airport to help me, and of their sometimes nasty, sometimes dumbfounded responses, and also the looks on peoples' faces as they heard me and clearly wanted nothing to do with me and quickly looked the other way. The knocking at my door was becoming incessant—new voices asking me to go to their office so we could talk. Who could this be and what did they want with me? Could I dare to trust them? Were they trying to help me? There was always a sliver of faith, tiny but present, that made me believe good people would come to my rescue. But not the ones in this hotel. I decided the door knockers were menacing creeps on the same side as the gang of thugs who put me in this room and that my life was better protected on the inside. But as the knocking continued, so did my sense of terror. I could still hear the Kuwaiti man telling me that if I tried to leave the airport, the Saudi embassy would make me regret it. Then, as if on cue,

the Kuwaiti man came to the door and said, "Open the door so I can talk to you." I shouted at him through the door and told him to go away and tell everyone to leave me alone.

By now exhaustion was seeping into my mind as well as my body. I hadn't slept in two days or eaten since I was at my aunt's house in Kuwait. I was scared and worried that this overwhelming fatigue would make me sleep. And it occurred to me that if I fell asleep, they could enter the room and kidnap me, and I wouldn't have the energy or power to fight or to defend myself or to run away from them. I stayed in that room for hours, listening to the harassing knocks at the door. Finally they stopped and I presumed the men outside went away.

I fought the overwhelming urge to sleep; there were only twenty-four hours until my flight would depart. I tried to think of a way to save myself, some exit or doorway or place I had overlooked, but increasingly I was consumed with thoughts about how my life would end. Would I wait for them to come and get me, or should I kill myself right here—break the mirror in the washroom and cut my wrist or set fire to the place with the lighter I had with me and take us all down in flames? I cannot find words to describe the feeling in your soul when you know your fate and know the end of your life is near. I was consumed with the facts of the lives of girls and women—we are half the world's population but we mean nothing to the people who run the world. I thought only Saudi Arabia and a few other Muslim countries were like that, but here in Thailand the men cared nothing for my safety, my truth, my life. What is it about being a girl that makes people think it's their right to control you, speak for you, plan your life and beat you whenever they feel like it?

I was falling ever deeper into despair when I received a

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message on WhatsApp from an Australian journalist who'd been following my tweets. Her name was Sophie McNeill. She said she had contacted Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in Bangkok and Sydney and sent them the tweets that were out there and asked if they could help me. And she wondered if I knew anyone else—maybe in Australia—that she should contact to help me. I had to tell her I didn't know anyone like that. She emailed others—journalists and UN refugee agency people. It was when she got a reply from the Human Rights Watch deputy director in Asia, based in Bangkok, that she told me help might be on the way. She said he spoke Thai, knew people at the Bangkok UNHCR office and even had good contacts at the Thai government office. Right away he started tweeting about me and said he was “extremely worried that [a] Saudi woman Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun will face similar fate [to Dina Ali] if she is forced back from #Thailand. She wants to seek asylum, currently being kept at #Bangkok airport hotel by representatives of #SaudiArabia embassy.” Sophie thought this was significant for my case; she said now it wasn't just Saudi activists and friends tweeting about me. If Human Rights Watch was worried about my fate and publicly willing to lobby for me, that would help me to gain the attention of the UN and foreign embassies in Thailand. Then Sophie sent me a text to tell me to hold on. “I'm coming to Bangkok,” she said.

I clung on to those words like one who's dying of thirst and is offered water, and waited the rest of the day and all night hoping there was at last a rescue. Did I dare believe that someone would fly from Australia to Bangkok to know my story? Could I trust her? I had to—she was my last hope.

I didn't move from my room until I heard from Sophie when she arrived in Bangkok at 4:30 in the morning and contacted me to ask the best way to meet without raising too many alarms. She wanted to know if anyone was watching me, anyone outside my room. I gave her the name of the hotel and its location in the airport and hoped we could meet in the lobby, but it wasn't possible to do that without attracting attention.

Sophie stayed in the lobby to keep watch, to make sure no one could take me. She suggested I get some sleep, but I don't think I slept at all. Sometime after 6 a.m. Sophie informed me that human rights advocates said I must make a claim for asylum right away, at the hotel. A colleague of Sophie's, who worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Bangkok, had arrived by then and suggested I make my refugee claim with their cameras rolling.

I walked toward the lobby, trying to pump up my level of confidence, feeling scared but somehow triumphant, as though the door to my future might be opening. The minute my eyes met Sophie's, I felt safe. I even started smiling despite my turmoil and kept smiling because waves of relief were rolling over me. At last there was someone on my side who knew what was happening to me.

I walked over to a hotel employee and asked her to call the authorities so I could ask for asylum in Thailand before the flight I was to take to Kuwait would leave. She ignored me. It was as though I was invisible. I tried another airport official—same confounding brush-off. Sophie started tweeting about what she was witnessing now that she was at the hotel. She posted a tweet saying, "There are guards outside the hotel room. It's 6:20 a.m. in Thailand. She's been threatened to be put on the 11:15 a.m. Kuwait Airways flight. She's been denied

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access to a lawyer. She wants to speak to UNHCR Thailand and claim asylum." Then I started to hear from people suggesting I defend myself by going limp and playing dead or screaming my head off and kicking anyone who came near me.

We kept at it, trying to get someone to help me, until shortly after 8:00 a.m., when a Thai immigration official appeared. He wouldn't listen to my demand to file a claim. Eventually I figured I'd better get back to my room and lock the door because the security guards were coming at nine to take me to the departure lounge for the 11:15 a.m. flight.

Not long after, Sophie slipped by the security guard and joined me in my hotel room. I started worrying that the authorities would come to my room and use a hotel key to open it, so I decided to barricade the door. Sophie was recording my pleas for help and sending my voice out to the world, telling people I was seeking asylum. She also recorded me dragging furniture to block the door so that even if the officials had a key, they wouldn't be able to get in. First I pushed and pulled and finally got a table about three metres by two metres to the door. It was really heavy. Despite my exhaustion I kept pushing it until I had it positioned against the door, but it was a haphazard protection, to say the least. I wondered, *Is this going to work out and will this save me?* I decided the table wouldn't be enough of a barrier, so I cleared everything off the bed, upended the mattress, slid it on its side to the door and crammed it in beside the table. All I could think of now was putting as much stuff as I could against the door so that no one could enter. I even put a chair on top of the table, even though I knew very well that chair wouldn't make a difference.

At 9 a.m. I was ready. The door was blocked with piles of

furniture, my plea to the United Nations had gone out with my name and my face and my words begging for help: "I am not leaving my room until I see UNHCR. I want asylum."

As frightening as the situation was, it wasn't without its moments of humour. One man sent me a tweet that said if I gave him US\$20,000 cash he would come and rescue me in the airport. Imagine that! But there were issues that were becoming increasingly problematic. Since I was in a hotel within the airport, no one could get to me unless they had purchased an airline ticket, which would allow them to enter the secure area where the Miracle Hotel is located. But Sophie told me that as the story about my dilemma spread around the world, the media were turning up and that many had managed to get into the departures area. Some of them were even waiting at the Kuwait Airways gate and ready to record whatever happened if I was put on that flight.

By now people were posting on Twitter with information that was not true. A television program called *Yahala* was interviewing a Saudi official from the Bangkok embassy who denied that my passport had been taken from me. This was a lie, but he confirmed that the Saudi embassy had called Thai authorities at the request of my father after he found out that I had escaped. Then another distortion: the Saudi official said that I did not have a valid visa to Australia. Yes, I did. I told Sophie about an ominous text I'd been sent saying that people who knew my father were trying to get me back. I felt sure my father was behind it. He was rich and had power, and everyone standing with him would do as he said. I never underestimated the reach he would have in getting me back.

People started coming to my door. The exchanges that followed, with the Kuwait Airways employee, the Thai man

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and some compliant woman they brought to my door, could be seen as comical if my life hadn't been at stake. They dodged between demanding, begging and cajoling. I was tweeting the details as fast as I could. Sophie was recording all of it. The Kuwait Airways employee was actually the person working with the Saudi embassy to help confiscate my passport.

The Kuwaiti representative said, "Open the door. What's wrong with you?" I said, "I can't." He said, "Can you open the door just a bit?" I didn't reply. A while later, a woman knocked and asked if I'd like any breakfast. We had launched into a good-cop, bad-cop scenario. Then a Thai official knocked and said I had to leave. "You don't have asylum in this country," he said. "You cannot take asylum in Thailand."

I'd done everything I could. Now they were knocking again, telling me to open up, it was time for my flight. Where was UNHCR? Was I not a valued-enough human to get their attention, or did they presume, as all these hotel people did, that I was a rebellious teenager who should be sent home? I knew that on the other side of that door was either my death or a brand new beginning. The knocking stopped. There was an eerie silence at the door. I was checking my phone for the time every two or three minutes. The flight departure was still an hour and forty-five minutes away. What was happening? Like in a chess game, I was waiting for the rook to make a move. Sophie and I talked about what might happen next. I was reading the tweets that were coming in—hundreds of them from around the world kept pinging up on my phone. The heartfelt messages let me know there were a lot of people out there cheering for me, hoping I would be rescued. They



were addressing me and Kuwait Airways and the UN. Some of these tweets read:

We are with you.  
Is this happening right now?

Keep fighting for your rights and freedom.

Stay strong.

Save Rahaf.

Do not allow your airline to deport her.

Time is running out.

This teenager is doomed.

Yell scream let everyone around know you are HERE.

Her family will kill her it is inevitable.

The whole world is worried about her.

We hear you, don't go anywhere.

This is a death or life case.

Stay strong we are praying for News.

I hope for a happy ending.

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She wants to seek asylum.

God bless her.

I read her tweets it is horrifying I'm so sorry for you Rahaf.  
In solidarity with you.

I tweeted back:

based on the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, I'm  
rahaf mohmed [*sic*], formally seeking a refugee status to  
any country that would protect me from getting harmed  
or killed due to leaving my religion and torture from my  
family.

And again:

I seek protection in particular from the following country  
Canada/United States/Australia/the United kingdom, I ask  
any [of its] Representatives to contact me.

I was still obsessively checking the time on my phone.  
Sophie was recording; I was tweeting. She was connected  
to reporters on the outside. They were monitoring the flight  
I was supposed to be on. I was actually lying down, totally  
exhausted and trying not to sleep, when Sophie said, "Rahaf,  
the flight has gone." I sat up and asked her to say it again.  
She said, "There is another flight to Saudi Arabia in fifteen  
minutes but the flight you were booked on has left." It was a  
victory for me. I was incredibly relieved and immediately fell  
into a deep sleep.

In the meantime, Sophie heard from her colleague that UNHCR officials had been at the airport for three hours but had been denied access to me by the Thai authorities. Soon the UNHCR put out a statement that said, "UNHCR has been following developments closely and immediately sought access from the Thai authorities to meet with Ms. Mohammed Al-qunun . . . to assess her need for international protection. . . . UNHCR consistently advocates that refugees and asylum seekers—having been confirmed or claimed to be in need of international protection—cannot be returned to their countries of origin according to the principle of non-refoulement . . . [which] prevents states from expelling or returning persons to a territory where their life or freedom would be threatened. This principle is recognized as customary international law, and is also enshrined in Thailand's other treaty obligations."

I slept for three hours, and when I woke up it was to news I could hardly believe: Sophie's contacts said the Thai authorities were processing my request for asylum. We waited inside my room in this Miracle Transit Hotel. If hope could be measured by heartbeats, I had a tally that could make wishes come true.

Around 4 p.m., a woman was at the door knocking and saying, "Excuse me, madam, the UN is here. We will not send you back to your country. Don't be worried." But Sophie's contact at Human Rights Watch told us, "Don't believe it. Wait for the UN." I logged on to my Australian visa account and saw that it had been cancelled. I stared at that revoked document and thought, *This is truly what despair looks like.*

Who would have cancelled my legitimate visa to Australia? At first I wondered how far my father's power reached. Could

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Saudi Arabia actually instruct another country like Australia to cancel a visa? What sort of deal with the devil do the officials in two countries make when they basically push the sacrifice button? But I reconsidered and realized my conclusion was wrong. It probably wasn't my father's power that cancelled my visa. More likely it was the Australian government that invalidated it because they knew I was going to seek asylum. I'd heard from my friends in Australia that this is how they treat Arabs. I already knew some of them had been deported upon arrival at the airport because the officials there don't want to deal with asylum cases. In October 2018, they treated my Saudi friend very badly and asked to speak to her father to make sure she was allowed to travel. That's how I knew I should have the name and contact details of a man who would pose as my father in case they asked to call him when I arrived.

The runaways I was in touch with were in Sweden, the UK, Germany, Canada and Australia. Once I'd made my decision to escape Saudi Arabia, I had chosen Australia. I suppose proximity matters, but my choice was mostly based on all the good things I'd heard about it. I knew it was a good country and that I would be able to go to school, work and live my life without beatings and fear. Women have rights in Australia. There are laws that say if you beat a woman or girl you will be punished. My friend lives there and says the people are kind, the beaches are beautiful and we can do everything there that we cannot do in Saudi Arabia.

A while later, a tweet popped onto my screen from the global head of media for the UN refugee operations. It said, "Dear

Rahaf, my @refugee colleagues are at the airport now and are seeking access to you!”

At 5:57 p.m. there was another knock on the door. I crawled over my barricade to look through the peephole. “Who is it?” I asked. “The UN” was the reply. “Proof, show ID, I need proof,” I said. They did. A business card slid under the door. It had the familiar UN logo and the name of one of the people I could see through the peephole on the door. They were asking me to let them come in. There was a semi-circle of Thai soldiers and others who were probably UN people around them. I pushed the piles of furniture out of the way and I opened the door.

The UN people said immediately they would protect me. They also told Sophie she had to leave, which scared me because I trusted her and felt safe with her. Then they asked me about the reason I tried to escape, about my life and my family. They recorded everything I said and took my photo and told me they would do everything in their power to make sure nothing happened to me. They said they were taking me to a hotel in a secret location where there would be very tight security protection while they examined the documents I would need to establish a refugee claim. They returned my passport to me and I showed them the valid Australian tourist visa on my phone that had now been cancelled. They had already launched formal arrangements for my long-term asylum status.

Then we left the room that had been my refuge for the longest two days of my whole life.

As we walked toward the airport exit that I hadn't been able to find, the Thai official who was overseeing my immigration status walked beside me, saying, “We will not send

anyone to die. We will not do that. We will adhere to human rights under the rule of law." I thought, *Where the heck were you when I begged for help from all those people in the airport?* There was a crush of security, UN officials, airport authorities and media around me; it was as though I was walking in place on a moving ramp cocooned inside a circle of men. When we exited the airport, despite the entourage around me I felt the setting sun on my face and thought immediately of my exit from the hotel in Kuwait at 5 a.m. two days earlier. The soft wind and warm sun that had touched my face and neck as well as my soul that morning was still there, thousands of miles away, assuring me that I too would rise again.

The UN checked me into the Royal Princess Larn Luang hotel in downtown Bangkok and came back later with my checked bag, which they had retrieved from the arrivals carousel. Sophie stayed there too but wasn't allowed to be with me. I even asked her to buy me some cigarettes but the UN said she could not deliver anything to me. There was no television in the hotel room, but I used my phone to check the news and was astonished to find my story on every broadcast. My face was plastered all over the place. I was wearing the jeans with blood on them from the nosebleed I'd had earlier, the same short-sleeved shirt I'd been wearing, and a look on my face that taught me a lesson: here I was, in the middle of what had become an international news story pitting Saudi Arabia against the United Nations, walking out of a death trap and into daylight and safety, but my face did not show the terror and anxiety and fatigue I had felt. Instead I saw the face of a girl who was determined, strategic and maybe slightly surprised.

I read a tweet from the UNHCR that said, "Thai authorities have granted UNHCR access to Saudi national, Rahaf

Mohammed Al-qunun, at Bangkok airport to assess her need for international refugee protection. . . . For reasons of confidentiality and protection, we will not be in a position to comment on the details of the meeting.”

Once again, I presumed the drama had come to an end. I lingered in a long, hot shower and prepared to fall into bed hoping for a peaceful sleep and knowing that the UN staff would meet me in the lobby of this hotel in the morning. Little did I know the third chilling act of this drama was about to begin.

Two UN officials came to my room before I turned out the light. They told me that my father and my big brother Mutlaq had just arrived in Bangkok; they had gone to the Thai authorities to ask to see me but had been refused. My father called the UN and said that if he couldn't see me, he demanded the right to talk to me over the phone. The UN man asked me if I wanted to talk to my dad but advised me to refuse the request. I told them, “I don't need any advice. I wouldn't even consider talking to my dad.” And I warned them about my father's influence on others and his ability to have his own way. By now my alarm system was fully operational again.

Actually, I felt certain that my father and my brother had come there to kill me. I tried to let the UN people know that I was scared that someone would help them. I knew how things worked in Saudi Arabia, so even though there were police in front of my door and in the lobby of the hotel, I still didn't really feel safe. I even found myself checking the lock on the door and wondering if my father and brother could find their way to my room, force their way in and kidnap me. And it occurred to me that my father could try to bribe

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these policemen to open the door and let him come into this room. Or what if these guards came in and took me to him? I put a table against my door—just like in the hotel room in the airport. I was even too scared to sit on the balcony to smoke, thinking they might be outside and waiting for the chance to shoot me. There's no limit to what they can do when their so-called honour has been smeared. There were UN men staying in the room next to my room and in other rooms as well; I don't remember how many there were. But they were good and they protected me every step of the way.

In the morning the UN men took me to a hospital to have a checkup as well as blood tests to make sure I was healthy and hadn't been injured. Then we went to the Australian embassy for a meeting with immigration and refugee officials there. But most of the day was spent in my room, where I was on my phone watching the unfolding melodrama of my own life even as it was interrupted by advertisements and weather reports. I heard reporters talking about how there was pressure on Australia to take me. And every channel I clicked on was featuring the arrival of my father and brother and the backstory about the lives of women and girls in Saudi Arabia. Most of them featured footage of poor Dina Ali begging for her life in a Philippines airport. And all of them spoke of the guardian system in Saudi Arabia that gives a father, husband or son the right to control everything a mother, daughter, wife or sister does throughout her life from birth to death. They described my life perfectly: I'm not allowed to marry; I'm not allowed to get a job or leave the house or travel anywhere without the permission of my guardian. Women are treated like minors even if they are fifty or sixty years old. A teenage boy can beat his grandmother for sitting in the garden without permission.



I wanted to shout at the videos I was watching, "That's what has got to change in Saudi Arabia. That's what drove me away."

I followed the shifting status of my situation all day on the Al Jazeera television network. The UNHCR representative in Thailand said, "It could take several days to process the case and determine next steps. We are very grateful that the Thai authorities did not send her back against her will and are extending protection to her." Oh yeah? They hadn't protected me until the UNHCR came along!

Thailand's immigration police chief was also interviewed. He said, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not asked for her extradition." The embassy tweeted that they considered this issue a "family matter." Then why did they send a Saudi official to pose as an airport employee and claim he was helping me when I landed in Bangkok?

One report after another quoted sources who really were trying to help me. Human Rights Watch called on Australian officials to allow me into the country. Their Australian director said that since Australia had expressed concern in the past about women's rights in Saudi Arabia, it should "come forward and offer protection for this young woman."

The Australian government claimed it was monitoring the case closely and that it was "deeply concerning" that I had said I would be harmed if I was returned to Saudi Arabia. A senator called on her government to issue me an emergency travel document so I could fly to Australia to seek asylum.

Al Jazeera said, "It . . . comes at a time when Riyadh is facing mounting pressure over the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at its consulate in Istanbul in October, and over the humanitarian consequences of its devastating war in Yemen."

I also checked the UNHCR website. It said that refugee status is normally granted by governments, but the UNHCR can grant it where states are "unable or unwilling to do so." It also said that they do not comment on individual cases. One media outlet simply concluded, "Now that Ms Mohammed al-Qunun has been given this status, another country must agree to take her in." But I listened to another comment by the deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch, who said he was worried about me. "She said very clearly that she has suffered both physical and psychological abuse. She said she has made a decision to renounce Islam. And I knew once she said that, she is in serious trouble."

I posted a new message on Twitter saying, "Don't let anyone break your wings, you're free. Fight and get your RIGHTS!"

One of the reporters caught the Saudi chargé d'affaires in Bangkok on a hot mic while at a meeting with airport officials and Ali, the Kuwaiti guy who was on to my case like a mosquito. The chargé d'affaires had no idea the microphone was on when he said, "They should have [taken] her phone instead of her passport." The men at the table laughed like co-conspirators. Even with the international community watching, even with the world knowing what happens to girls like me in Saudi, this man seemed to think that I should have been captured and returned to my fate at the hands of my father and brothers. And the men at the table either agreed with him or didn't have the courage to dismiss his disgustingly guilty comment.

As the day wore on, my story continued to headline the news. During the afternoon, the Australian foreign minister arrived from Sydney and was scrummed by reporters on the steps of the Australian embassy. I was hanging on to every

word she said, but to be honest I was expecting to hear her say that she'd travelled here to process my asylum papers and take me back to Australia. Wrong. The way she replied to the reporters' questions put me right back in escape limbo—*Am I safe? Will I make it? What are the UN and government people saying to each other?* The foreign minister said that after talking with Thai officials, they were assessing my claim for asylum. Then she said, "There are a number of steps still to be taken in the assessment process." By now I was gulping and going into panic mode. *Oh my god, does this mean they aren't going to take me after all?* When the reporters pushed her as though interpreting my own questions, she went on to say, "There are, as I have just said, a number of steps in the process, including in terms of that assessment. They are required to be taken and they will be completed within due course and then that matter will be resolved." She also said there was no time frame and that there was no possibility I would be going back with her to Australia. She said I would have to get in line like everyone else.

I can hardly describe the way I felt at that moment. I wanted to shout at her, "I've been waiting in line my whole life, being mistreated and beaten and feeling I was dodging death. I have risked everything, including my life, to escape the injustice of a country that clearly hates women. Which part of this do you not understand?"

A long day turned into night. The television reports intensified. So did my anxiety. What I didn't know that night was that the UNHCR team was working behind the scenes to ensure my safety. They needed to fast-track my asylum application, mostly because after the Thai police informed them that my father and brother were in Bangkok looking for me,

they were increasingly worried about my security. The next morning the men from the UN came to my hotel and took me to the Canadian embassy. The meeting was short and sweet: the ambassador said, "Would you like to live in Canada?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Your visa will be ready at three o'clock this afternoon. You are booked on a flight to Toronto tonight." In two short sentences my fortunes changed. I hardly knew what to say. Thank you seemed inadequate. I felt tears welling up in my eyes as I tried to convey my gratitude to this man and to the UN people who were with me.

Later I learned that the UN had used what are known as back channels through the night. They felt the Australians were taking too long with their decision. I also found out that the deputy director from Human Rights Watch in Bangkok had been "working his contacts," as they say in their business, to get me safely out of Thailand. He said Canada offered immediate asylum, something Australia was unwilling to do. I understand he said, "She needed to get out of Thailand very quickly. Her brother and father were still here and these were the people she feared. The Thai government was also very keen to have her moved as quickly as possible and the feeling was also that Saudi Arabia is a very influential government and it has a lot of capacity to pursue people, particularly women who could tarnish their image if allowed to remain free on an international stage."

I was on a Korean Air flight that departed Bangkok at 11:37 p.m., bound for Canada.

As soon as the plane was airborne, UNHCR issued a statement saying I had left for Canada. They explained that they'd had growing concerns about my safety and about the uncertain timelines from the Australian government about whether

or not they would grant me asylum; they had referred my case to Canada, and the Canadian government had processed my application in a matter of hours.

Arriving at Pearson International Airport in Toronto felt more like a lift-off to a new life than a landing. I'd been told by the Canadian ambassador in Thailand that someone would meet my plane—he might have even said who that would be, but as the plane taxied to the gate I had no idea what was next. The flight attendant came to my seat and said I would be taken off the plane first. Three airport officials were at the top of the ramp and said someone from the Canadian government was waiting to meet me in a nearby office. I didn't know who was who in the government of Canada, but I soon realized they must care about me, because the person waiting to greet me was the minister of foreign affairs, Chrystia Freeland, and her secretary. But more than that, the minister had brought her daughter, who is my age, with her, which made me feel very welcome. Her daughter gave me a hoodie with *Canada* written on it. I had a ball cap from UNHCR, so that's what I was wearing when I left the arrivals area. Two women from an organization that helps refugees settle in Canada joined us a few minutes later and explained they were the ones who would help me find a place to live, register at a school and buy some warm clothing. It was winter in Canada and I noticed the cold right away. The foreign minister assured me that it would get warmer. The women also warned me that along with the media there were crowds of well-wishers; they would speak to them to say I had arrived safely. I felt I should go with them. As the doors to the exit slid open, I could hardly believe my eyes: a crowd of reporters, photographers and TV camera crews, as well as dozens of people I didn't know, had

assembled in the arrivals area. As soon as they saw us coming through the door they began clapping, cheering and shouting “Welcome to Canada” to me. I could hardly process what I was seeing. Having grown up in a place where women have to be covered and hidden and regarded as invisible, I was being greeted as though I was somebody who existed, who had the right to be there.

Minister Freeland told the crowd to quiet down and said, “This is Rahaf al-Qunun, a very brave new Canadian.” She had her arm through mine but let go of me to step toward the crowd and catch a bouquet of roses someone was throwing to me. I was trying to absorb this: a government official meeting my plane instead of turning me back, then catching flowers in mid-air and tucking them into my arms. Believe me—this was so far from my experience, I was watching it as though I had wandered onto a movie set. Then she told the crowd, “It’s obvious that the oppression of women is not a problem that can be resolved in a day, but rather than cursing the darkness we believe in lighting a single candle. Where we can save a single woman, a single person, that’s a good thing to do.”

As much as I had struggled for this moment, I couldn’t believe it was actually happening. I couldn’t speak as I was overwhelmed with the sense that I was free, that I was born anew; it washed over me like an aura that made me feel giddy with happiness. I felt loved and welcomed. I had an enormous rush of pride and gratitude—my voice had been heard, these people understood. Freedom is the most important thing for a person. I gave up everything to be free.

As we left the airport I went back to Twitter, the social media platform that I had relied on throughout this odys-

sey, because I wanted to say thank you to all the people who helped me, believed in me and took this long, scary ride with me. I tapped out my message:

I would like to thank you people for supporting me and saving my life. Truly I have never dreamed of this love and support. You are the spark that would motivate me to be a better person.

Then I leaned back in the car and wondered what the next chapter of my life would bring.

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