

STOLEN



Louise Monaghan (top right) with her sister Mandy (top left), daughter May (bottom left) and RTÉ TV and radio presenter Ryan Tubridy (bottom right) after Louise appeared on *The Late Late Show* on RTÉ One just after her escape from Syria.

Stolen

Escape from Syria

LOUISE MONAGHAN
AND YVONNE KINSELLA



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Nobody walks alone on any difficult journey. Your loved ones, although they might not be with you, feel the same pain, fear, terror and complete hopelessness that you experience. It was the acknowledgement of this fact that kept my spirit soaring and gave me hope on my own journey. I knew in my heart that no matter how far away from home I was, I was never really alone.

During my ordeal in Syria my biggest dread was nightfall, and in my darkest hours, while I cried myself to sleep, I knew that those who loved me cried with me. My sister, Mandy, endured the agony of my confinement in Syria, the treacherous journey to Damascus and every horrific setback that befell myself and my daughter, May. Our parting of ways in Turkey will be forever etched in my memory. Although it went unsaid, I truly believed that I would never see her again, and that alone, setting aside the magnitude of the situation, was absolutely heartbreaking. I love her unconditionally. She is the most inspirational woman I have ever known.

My father, Frank, or Frankie as he is known everywhere, paced floors, cried tears, pleaded and prayed for our safe return. A popular man in our area, he generated great interest in our

story and his raising awareness of our plight aided our return more than he will ever realise. You are a good man, Dad, a great man, and we love you.

Josh, my little man, my nephew, is a truly courageous child. He lives with illness every day, and despite the daily medication he never complains. As a child he was happy and carefree and a constant source of joy to my late mammy and all his family. As a teenager, he is self-assured, sensitive, wise and a friend.

Sean, Mandy's fiancé, committed himself to minding Dad and Josh, allowing us peace of mind in that respect.

I had many hours when, frustratingly, I had to just wait, and during these times my mind would wander back to carefree moments in Cyprus.

Janine and I spent hours just talking, debating and sorting out all of the world's problems. Her daughters and May were truly like sisters. Janine and I shared the same passion, a love of the 'simple life'. We walked through rain-soaked forests in the winter and basked in the sun on quiet beaches in the summer. I loved our morning coffees together, and we laughed, always. I love her, and she will forever be in my heart and thoughts.

I met my other dear and fantastic friend Nicola on my first day at work at Olympic Holidays. During my best and worst days she was by my side. Forever constant, she is the definition of a true friend. Her mum, Irene, a fantastic and strong Scottish lady, was always the voice of reason, and I wish to thank them both for caring enough to make a difference.

Deirdre, my 'Irish friend', dropped everything when she got a call. A fantastic person, so full of life, she brightened up even the worst days.

Everyone needs a hero in life and mine, apart from my dear departed mammy and May, is my Auntie Kathy. A champion for those in need from all walks of life, she has selflessly dedicated herself to helping people, without asking for gratitude or reward. Always a tower of strength, she worked tirelessly with my sister to get me and May home, and during real times of despair she was the voice of hope.

Elaine, Kathy's daughter, my cousin and dear friend, I always felt love for me radiate from her every time we were together and it was always so comforting. I love her too and could not imagine not having her in my life.

My cousin Tash came to Cyprus with my sister and endured the nightmare with us, and I thank her for being there.

Yvonne Kinsella came into our lives unexpectedly. It's astonishing to discover you have so much in common with a person you didn't know six months ago. Yvonne never relented in aiding us with our struggle and we will be forever friends.

May and I were astounded by the support we received from all other family members, friends and neighbours throughout our ordeal and on our return. There really is no place like home.

I cannot finish my acknowledgements without mentioning how eternally grateful I am to the many angels I met in Syria. They saved my life. There are so many people whose names I have had to change to protect them, but they know who they are. You were all a huge support to me when I needed it most. Some of you had never even met me or May until we were stranded in a strange country in the midst of war, but without you all we would not be here today. That is a fact, and I say this in particular to Sayed and Rahil.

I learned that despite race, religion and cultural differences, people are all the same. There is good and bad everywhere. But sometimes you only notice these things when you are at your lowest ebb and alone. My situation certainly opened my eyes. And I will never forget this.

In summing up, I also want to thank Mainstream Publishing for giving me the opportunity to get my story out there to help others in similar situations. I also wish to thank the officials in the Departments of Foreign Affairs in Ireland, Cyprus, Syria, Turkey and Egypt, especially the Irish ambassador based in Cairo at the time, Her Excellency Isolde Moylan. At times I was so frustrated by the delays in getting myself and May out of Syria that I lost all hope in your help, but you got us there eventually and you will never know how grateful we are for

that. Far too many to mention personally are all the other politicians, both local and international, who helped us. Joe from the Dublin Passport Office worked tirelessly to ensure we had the correct travel documents. Finally, I would like to thank Mary Banotti, who, on my return, was my confidante and mentor.

And last but by no means least I want to thank my beautiful and courageous daughter, May, who at just six years of age took on a mammoth task, terrifying at many times, and was her mammy's rock as we made our escape from Syria. May, you truly are the best child any mother could have and every minute of my journey to get you safely home to Ireland was worth it. I would do it all again in a heartbeat to know that you are safe. You mean the world to me.

If I have forgotten to mention anyone, please believe me it is not intentional. Anyone who came into my life before and during our horrible ordeal will always be in my thoughts and prayers, no matter what. I am blessed with my family and my friends and will always be indebted to you all.

Love always, Louise

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Preface

In September 2011 my world was torn apart when my ex-husband, Mostafa Assad, the father of my six-year-old daughter, May, brutally abducted his own child during one of his routine visits.

Against all odds, he managed to smuggle her out of Cyprus, where we were living, in and then out of Turkey and finally into his homeland of Syria. He managed all of this despite the fact that he had no valid passport for our child and she was on a 'stop list' preventing either of us from taking her outside of the country without written permission from the other.

I had cancelled May's passport a year before this horrible day when I realised that he had taken it from my home, despite me being her legal guardian. It was a tip-off from a teacher in her playschool back then that alerted me to a possible plan by Mostafa to abduct our child. Never in my wildest dreams did I think he would actually succeed in doing it. And the authorities in Cyprus simply dismissed all of my concerns as those of an overprotective mother.

Having gone through the immediate fear and natural hysteria brought on by the kidnap of my baby, and then realising that to make matters worse she was now in a Middle Eastern country

in the grip of war, I made the hard decision to bow down to the demands of my very controlling ex-husband and I started to play a game. A game that saw me pretend that I actually wanted to make a go of our marriage again, despite our divorce, but a game that I knew I had to play if I was to ever see my beautiful daughter again.

With a longing heart, eager to be reunited with my child as quickly as possible, I walked into Syria alone, amidst gunshots and bomb blasts, and I too became captive in a house of tyranny.

Locked up with little food and no contact with the outside world, hidden from Mostafa's family and neighbours, I prayed that Turkish human traffickers paid by my family would somehow find us and save us.

But they never came.

Left with no choice but to escape, and miraculously given a freak chance to do so, we ran, myself and May. And, after many hours on the road, having faced many heavily armed checkpoints along the way and having endured the intimidation of armed men, we somehow, miraculously, made it to a 'safe house'.

But, despite the initial relief, we soon realised that we weren't actually safe just yet. Hours turned into days and days into weeks, but when all hope was lost, and believing there was a warrant out for my arrest and that I could be stoned to death or jailed for life for kidnap under sharia law, we somehow managed to flee.

And with many terrifying twists and turns along the way we eventually made it back to Ireland and the safe arms of our loving family.

This book tells the harrowing details of that fateful day when Mostafa Assad tore my world apart and that of my child, and it reveals the horrific journey we had to make to eventually reach safe ground.

Today, we are alive and well, but our lives will never be the same again. We must now live under assumed names and have been forced to move away from the family who fought so hard to save us, simply because one man has set out to

PREFACE

destroy our lives and could strike again at any time. If he does not do it himself, I know he has others only too willing to wait in the wings until he decides that the time is right to try again. I know that even if he is in a prison cell, he could very well still make plans, and next time we might not be so lucky.

I decided to write this book in a bid to help others who might one day find themselves in a similar situation.

I have learned an awful lot about parental abductions on my journey, a journey I wish I had never needed to take, and if I can even save one person, man or woman, from a similar ordeal, then this will have been worth every painful minute. More than 200,000 family abductions took place in the USA alone in 2009, according to the 2010 Report on Compliance with the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspect of International Child Abduction prepared by the US Department of State's Office of Children's Issues. With such a huge number of abductions occurring, there has never been a better time to advise people on how to prevent kidnappings from happening. The reason for May's abduction lay in the cultural differences between myself and her father, so I think it is important to advise people on some of the pitfalls of a mixed marriage in the hope that they can avoid finding themselves in the same situation as I did. I am not for one minute telling people not to get into a mixed marriage, as those that fail are probably few and far between, but what I do want to do is to advise people to talk about their plans for the future, their ideas for bringing up children, what they see as the best options for raising a family and then to amicably work things out that suit both parents.

My little girl was abducted because she was due to start her education the very next day in a European school and not an Islamic school. It was as simple as that. And my ex-husband's unwillingness to even talk through his views with me led to a situation that will not only affect me for the rest of my life but will haunt our child for ever, too.

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If I could turn back the clock I would, but all I can do now is to try to mend the damage done to my beautiful child and to help others who find themselves in similar situations.

Hopefully, I can.

Louise Monaghan

CHAPTER ONE



The Worst Day of My Life

Wednesday, 7 September 2011 is a day that I will never forget for as long as I live. A day that will scar my life for ever, a day that absolutely shattered the idyllic lifestyle I had been living for nearly six years in the popular holiday resort of Limassol in Cyprus.

This day started out just like any other: the sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. But my little girl, May, was extra excited that morning because she knew that she was due to start what we all called 'big school' the following day. We had everything ready to go, and her little white polo shirt, her navy skirt and her new shoes sat proudly on the single bed in her princess-themed bedroom. Her little baby-pink schoolbag with a picture of a puppy on the front, which she picked out herself, was filled with her new school books and copybooks just waiting to be used. Her first day at school was a day I had been dreading for a long time, like all mummies do, as it's the most obvious sign that your little baby is growing up and from here on in she is shaping her future and becoming her own little person.

But I knew that May was all excited about her new endeavour and so I was excited for her. She had been to preschool the

previous year and she absolutely loved it. I had enrolled her in the ‘big school’ at Mesa Yitonia. I never had a problem getting her up in the mornings because she actually loved getting dressed up to meet her friends in ‘school’, as she called her preschool, so I knew the transfer to the big school wouldn’t be a problem at all. She had lots of friends who would be starting in the same class on that same day. Everything was just fitting nicely into place.

I know that all mothers think their child is extra special, but, honestly speaking, May has always been great, never complaining and always wanting to make her mammy happy.

On Tuesday night, May’s father, Mostafa, whom I had divorced in November 2010, rang to say he would take May to the beach the following morning, as after we separated he had been given access to our daughter on a court order for a few hours every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday.

I was never happy with him taking May at any time because our relationship had become very strained over the years and he had very little time – and, in my mind, love – for our child. I genuinely believed that he only wanted to see her because he knew it upset me to let him be with her. However, I had noticed in recent months how he seemed to be making more of an effort with her, and he was definitely more patient.

I believe that he insisted on seeing May not just because of his controlling nature but also because he was Muslim, and not being allowed to see his child would diminish his parental rights and insult his religion.

But I had no choice in the matter, as the courts in Cyprus just weren’t prepared to listen to my concerns when we discussed guardianship rights. On several occasions I was threatened with imprisonment if I failed to comply with the orders of the court, so I was left with no alternative but to go ahead with the arrangements and trust that Mostafa wouldn’t hurt our little girl or try to take her away from me.

At one stage, May and Mostafa had to go for one-to-one counselling because May just didn’t want to be around her

father. She was very distrustful of him. But all of my worries just fell on deaf ears. No one listened. Despite my concerns that he may actually have mental issues, given his tendency to lash out verbally and physically, Mostafa's access to our child was actually extended.

During the court hearing in July 2010 he was also given access to her every second Christmas and Easter, but he was not allowed to keep her overnight, which was a relief to me. They said that his housing wasn't suitable for overnight stays, as he lived with a number of other Syrian men in rented accommodation.

Mostafa lived about five miles away from us in a town called Zakaki, an old village on the outskirts of Limassol, just under two miles from Lady's Mile beach, which May and I always visited. Zakaki has become newly developed in recent years and it is now home to My Mall, the biggest shopping centre in Cyprus. This is a place where people from all over the country come to shop for clothes or to meet friends for a coffee and a chat. It has a huge food mall and is also a very popular place for tourists.

On Wednesday morning, when Mostafa arrived to pick May up, I was on the floor doing some daily exercises, as I was suffering from an illness that affected my hips and back and left me in an awful lot of pain and very stiff. When he arrived, I got up and went into the kitchen to pack a little lunchbox for May.

He was quieter than usual that morning, and he actually followed me all around the rooms as I sorted May's clothes for the beach. I could feel him watching my every move. Normally he would just stand there, waiting, knowing that he wasn't welcome, but on this day he seemed to have an air of cockiness about him that should have alerted me to something being wrong but that I somehow dismissed.

I remember putting May's beloved Nintendo DS into the bag and packing her little bikini and some suncream as I ran around the place, trying not to delay him. Mostafa never had money, he lived from day to day all the time, and so as he was

leaving I asked him if he needed some cash. He suddenly looked very agitated and he just ignored the question. But I wasn't thinking of him; I wanted to make sure that he had enough money to buy May an ice cream, as it was a very hot day and they would be out in the heat for a few hours. So I decided to take no notice of him, and as they left the apartment I went back in for my purse and I handed May a twenty-euro note over the veranda.

As she went to walk away, smiling nervously as she always did when she was forced to go with him, I noticed that I hadn't brushed her hair, so I called her back to fix it. But Mostafa was having none of it. He grabbed May by the hand, dragging her towards the car, saying that he had a hairbrush in the car and he would do it himself.

We didn't really get on, myself and Mostafa, but I do remember thinking that he had been extra cool with me that morning, but then again he had days when he could be like that so once again, to my peril, I just brushed it off.

I remember as they left, I was looking down at May from the veranda and thinking how pretty she looked that day. She was a beautiful child, inside and out, but she just looked radiant in her little T-shirt and a gorgeous cream-coloured dress with pink and purple flowers that I had picked up for her in a Debenhams store the week before and a little pair of girly flip-flops. She had a lovely hairband in her hair, and she stood at the gate and said, 'Mam, I love you so much.'

I said, 'I love you too, my angel,' and she walked away.

As she got into the car I suddenly got a very weird feeling, a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Something just wasn't right in my mind. I rang him almost immediately and I said, 'Mostafa, is everything OK?'

He snapped at me and said, 'Yes. Why?'

I said, 'You were acting a little bit strange this morning.'

He snapped back, 'Oh, Louise, you are starting again. I have access to see my daughter, and she *is* my daughter after all.' He got very defensive, saying it was his time with May and insisting

that he just wanted time with his child, so he sort of reassured me a little. I spoke via the loudspeaker on his phone to May, who said they were going to the beach. She sounded fine, so I felt relieved and I just carried on with what I was doing.

I busied myself getting ready for work, and I headed out the door at roughly 11 a.m. I was working at the time in a company called Olympic Holidays, a British tour operator based in Cyprus. I was a sales consultant in their call centre, and I did hours to suit myself really. Now that the summer rush was over things were much quieter, leaving me more time with May, which suited me perfectly. I had worked for Olympic for five years and I absolutely loved my job. I was one of their best sales people, even though I only worked part-time to enable me to look after my daughter. We were like one big happy family at Olympic, which is very rare in workplaces today. I was on a good basic salary every month and earned great commission, so May and myself had a lovely life in Cyprus. We normally spent our weekends in various upmarket hotels on the island, enjoying their swimming pools and being pampered. I got some really good discounts in all of the hotels because of my job, and we really made the most of it when we could. Life was great. We were very close and I was so happy with our life as a little family.

I missed my dad and my sister, who were living back in Dublin, but that week I was looking forward to my dad and his friend coming over to visit us, as they were due to arrive in Larnaca on the following Sunday. May was excited to be seeing her granddad, as they were very close, and she was his only granddaughter so he spoiled her rotten whenever he did get to visit.

We had lost Mammy in 2001 in a devastating car accident, and we all rallied around my dad after that, as he was lost without the woman who loved him and made every day easy for him. They were very united. Their only children are myself and my younger sister, Mandy, who lives in Dublin with Dad, and we are a very close-knit family. Every visit he made was

important to me and I loved it when he'd ring to say he was coming over. I knew that we were due to have a busy week, with May starting school and my dad arriving, but we were both so excited over it and had everything ready for his visit.

But as I sat in the office at about noon that day a very uneasy feeling came over me again. I cannot explain why I felt that way, as Mostafa wasn't due to drop May back until 1 p.m. – those were the terms and conditions of his visitation rights – but for some unknown reason my stomach went into a knot, and I immediately picked up the phone and dialled his number.

When it signalled that his phone was switched off I knew instantly that something wasn't right. A mother's instinct, maybe, but I just knew.

I immediately switched my computer off and I said to my friend and colleague Nicola, 'I'm leaving, Nic. I can't get Mostafa on the phone. I just know there is something wrong.'

I didn't even wait for her reaction; I just grabbed my handbag and raced out of the office as fast as I could and jumped into the car. At this stage my heart was racing and my mouth was dry and I knew there was something not right with May. I could sense it.

I drove to the local beach that we often frequented, which was where Mostafa had said he was taking her. It had swings and a slide and May loved it, but on this day it was basically isolated. It was windy and the sand was blowing around, looking like little tornados, and as I looked around and saw they weren't on the beach, I knew there and then that he had taken her away from me.

I felt a sick feeling in my stomach, and I pulled my phone from my handbag and immediately rang my sister, Mandy, back in Dublin. In a blind panic I said, 'Mandy, he's taken her, she's gone.'

Mandy asked me what did I mean by 'he's taken her', and I said to her that I knew in my heart May was gone. I actually said to her, 'Mandy, I know he has gone to Syria.' I had no real reason to think that, he had not mentioned any plans to do so

to me, but my gut instinct told me that he had abducted our little girl and he was gone, they were gone, and I knew deep down that I might never see my baby again.

Poor Mandy was frantic, and I'm sure she must have felt even more helpless than I did right then, as she was 2,300 miles away. I knew that she would be getting on to the Garda back home to alert them, but I knew that the only people who could do anything for me at this stage were the Cypriot police, the CID or myself. I told Mandy that I would keep looking for May and Mostafa and I would ring her back as soon as I had more news.

I felt weak and nauseous, and I hadn't been feeling the best as it was, even before this happened, as I had a serious illness that affected my bones. Somehow, though, I put all the pain I had been experiencing in my back and my hips to the furthest corner of my mind, and without even realising it I started to act on autopilot.

I had already ruled out the beach, so I jumped back into the car and drove straight to the apartment where Mostafa lived, praying that I was horribly wrong and that I would see the car there, hoping that something minor had happened to delay him and everything was OK, but the car was gone. He had taken my other car, as he always did when took May out, so when I realised it was nowhere to be seen, my heart sank. I rang some of my friends in an awful state. I don't even know what I said exactly, as the words were just spewing out of my mouth in a state of panic. But they were brilliant. They all left their workplaces or their homes and said they would meet me at my apartment.

As I approached home, I tried to tell myself yet again that Mostafa might be there, just waiting for me to get back. My heart was racing. I was praying and praying that I was wrong and that he hadn't taken her at all, but once again I was wrong. There was no car and no sign of him or May. There was absolutely no doubt now that they were both gone. I had no hope left.

I was devastated. I couldn't think straight. I was crying and panicking and praying and I felt helpless. I kept ringing Mostafa's mobile. Nothing. When my friends heard what was going on, that he was late back and had his mobile turned off, one of them offered to take me to the local police station. As we pulled up outside, I jumped from the car, ran inside and screamed, 'My child has been kidnapped. Please help me.'

Despite my panic over the fact that my child was missing, I felt the Cypriot police did not respond appropriately. Unfortunately, I had frequented St John's Police Station many times before, reporting Mostafa over assaults, and I knew only too well what reception I would be facing, but because of the seriousness of this situation, I genuinely thought that it would be different this time.

They told me to sit down and calm down, that they would not accept this type of behaviour in the station. I continued to tell them that I knew my ex-husband had taken my daughter and I knew in my heart that he was taking her to Syria. Eventually, they directed me into the CID office, where they investigate serious crime. I hurriedly made my way upstairs to the office, followed by my friend, and we were met by an officer, who sat us down and was joined by another officer. I tried to stay calm, knowing that it was the only way they would listen to me, and I explained to him why I thought Mostafa had taken May to Syria.

I explained how the court order worked: that he was due to bring her back to me by 1 p.m. I told them that I had tried his mobile phone time and time again and I could not reach him, and I explained that his phone was never turned off. I told them that in all the years I had known him, his phone had never been turned off. There were many times when he would ignore my calls and just not answer, but he never turned the phone off.

I tried to tell them that as a mother I knew that my daughter was in trouble. I knew she had been abducted. I probably sounded like I was insane, but I knew in my heart that May was gone.

All the time I was speaking to them I was frantically dialling Mostafa's number, but every time I got the same message: that the person I was calling had their phone turned off, repeated over and over again in Greek. I knew that I probably looked like a madwoman, as it had been less than an hour since May was due back, but, thankfully, miraculously, they suddenly started to take me seriously and they began to take a statement. I told them everything. I explained how Mostafa had been acting strangely that morning, how I had a gut feeling as soon as he walked out the front door that something was going to happen.

Thankfully they sent out an all-points bulletin (APB), giving other officers a description of the silver BMW he had been driving and the registration number. They immediately radioed Dispatch and relayed the details to all the police cars on the roads around Limassol, urging them to try and find the car.

They asked me for a recent photograph of May. I didn't have one in my handbag at the time, so I sent my friend back to my home to get some pictures. At that moment I remembered all the photo-fits of missing children in this station, and it suddenly dawned on me that May would now be up on that wall with all the others who, until this day, I had felt sorry for. I thought they would probably never be found. Suddenly my child was one of those people. And I was one of those very parents.

As I recounted everything in detail to the police officer I felt as if I was in a movie. It all felt surreal, like a dream, a bad nightmare, the worst nightmare, and I just could not believe that the fears and dread I had experienced for years, the fears I had expressed so many times to the Cypriot authorities as Mostafa fought me for visitation rights, were suddenly all becoming a reality.

As I sat there, I started to think on my feet. I knew that he was taking May out of the country, and I knew that he would try to take her through the occupied territories of Northern Cyprus, which are effectively under the control of Turkey. I gave the police my telephone number, and my friend Deirdre

and I said that we would head towards the border in Deirdre's car in the hope that we could catch him before he made his way across into Turkey.

I couldn't figure out how he would manage to get May across a border, any border, into another country, as she had no current passport. I had cancelled her passport in September 2010, because I knew even back then that Mostafa might try to abduct her, and even if it never happened I wasn't prepared to take the chance that it could. I knew that with Mostafa anything was possible: if there was a will there was a way, and I had no time to lose.

As we started the car, ready to pull away, I tried Mostafa's phone again. I was shocked when it actually rang, but sickened when I realised that it was an international dialling tone, confirming my worst fears: that he was already outside of Cyprus.

All of a sudden he answered the phone. I felt my stomach churn. I tried to remain as calm as I could, but my heart was racing. I said, 'Oh my God, Mostafa, I've been ringing you all day. Where are you?'

He calmly replied, 'I am in Syria.' I don't know what came over me, but I tried to stay as unnerved as possible, even at that moment, and I asked him why he was in Syria. He replied, 'I am in Syria because I am taking May to Syria.' I asked him if he was already there and he said he would be there in an hour. I asked him if I could speak to May, and he immediately put her on the phone. I didn't want to upset May, so I stayed calm and asked her if she was all right. She said she was fine, but I could barely understand her because she sounded so upset. She said she was in a big shopping mall. I asked her if she had been on an aeroplane, and my heart dropped when she replied, 'Yes, Mama, I have.'

May and I spoke English to each other all the time, but she was also fluent in Greek and even spoke a little Arabic. I told May that I loved her, and I promised that I would see her soon. I knew that she would be missing me, because we were together

day and night and she was never out of my sight for more than a few hours, when she was in preschool or with her father on his rare visits. I knew she had very little trust in her father and that she would be fearing the worst.

Deirdre and I knew that it was pointless now to drive any further, as Mostafa was well and truly gone from Cyprus, but I rang CID straight away to tell them that I had spoken to him and that he was on his way into Syria. I begged them to get Interpol involved immediately, in the hope that they would have more control internationally. But CID told me to relax, that they would sort everything. They even tried to convince me that they would have May back with me safely within a few hours. But they were gravely underestimating my ex-husband. I knew that, but they wouldn't listen to me.

In a state of frustration and not knowing what to do or where to go next, I went back to my friend's house. By this stage, all of my friends had heard what had happened and they were all there, waiting for news. I contacted a friend who knew a lot of people in Turkey, and he said he would try to find out exactly where Mostafa could be if he was, as he said, an hour away from Syria.

Having tried to be strong for so long, as I tried to convince the police to take me seriously, I suddenly cracked. It was as if all of my emotions just exploded at the one time, and I was overcome with grief and heartache. I got very weepy and I felt my body collapse from beneath me and I began to have a panic attack. It wasn't something I had usually, but I knew that it was caused by sheer stress. I must have just fainted almost immediately, as the next thing I knew I was waking up in an ambulance and vomiting repeatedly. I thought I could hear Deirdre saying that they had caught Mostafa at the Turkish border, but it was all in my head, as I was totally confused.

I then collapsed a second time, because I remember waking up again, this time in hospital, and going into another fit of panic because I knew that I had to get to my mobile phone as quickly as possible, as Mostafa had said that he would ring me

when he reached Syria. I knew that he would wonder what was happening if I didn't answer the phone, and I knew that I would have to get out of the hospital urgently if I was to find my little girl, so I signed myself out with no treatment, feeling absolutely awful, very weak and very weepy.

My friend told me that Mostafa had phoned while I was in the hospital, and he told my friend to tell me that he was at his home in Syria and I was to ring him when I woke up. When I looked at the number on the phone it had a dialling code of 0096. I then knew for a fact that he was, as he said, in Syria.

I was very emotional, but I tried to be as calm as possible. I didn't want Mostafa to think I was annoyed with him, because I didn't know what he would do with May if he thought I was a risk and that I was going to get the police involved by reporting him as having kidnapped our child. I instinctively knew that I had to remain cool when speaking to him, to try not to give him any reason to think that I was worried about May. I had to make him believe that I understood him and that I just wanted to see our child.

Mostafa told me that she was very happy and that she was playing with her brother and sister, two children he had from a previous marriage in Syria. He told me that everything was going to be OK. He said, 'Listen, Louise, just leave your job, sell up everything and come over to Syria. I will get the BMW back to you and you can sell that too. Take all your money and come to us here and we will start a new life together. We will sort something out.'

I tried to play a game with him, even though I wanted to be sick from the panic. I said, 'Listen, Mostafa, this is a lot for me to do. You know I am waiting on the results of my hospital tests and I don't know yet if I have cancer.'

I had been very sick for a long time, and a recent trip to the hospital had confirmed that I had a condition called osteoarthritis and I was in a bad way. I needed to have both of my hips replaced urgently. They also informed me that I had a spinal condition called spondylitis, and they had found two

large cysts on my hips that they believed might be cancerous. I had been sick with worry since the day they broke the news to me. I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that I needed a hip replacement, as I was so active each day in the gym and in the swimming pool, but cancer was a word I had prayed I would never hear.

I had been very concerned about the cancer tests from the day I went into hospital, but now the situation seemed even worse than ever. Now, not only had Mostafa taken my child, but there was also a possibility that I might have cancer. If I did, then I knew that I needed to get to May and get her back as soon as possible. I needed to get her home to my family in Dublin so that Mostafa couldn't take custody of her.

But, despite my obvious concerns, Mostafa didn't seem concerned at all as I relayed my fears to him on the phone. He simply said, 'Well, I am sorry, but you left me with no choice. She was to start school tomorrow and you knew that I didn't want her to go to school there.'

Suddenly the real reason for him abducting May became crystal clear. May had been attending the local Greek preschool, and she was about to start national school, and it wasn't a Muslim school. Mostafa hadn't been happy about May attending the non-Muslim pre-school, but because it would only be for a short time he put up with it. But the primary school would be her place of education for six years, and he could not accept that. The school was literally across the car park from where I worked and it was so handy for both myself and May. I had sent her there because in most mixed marriages in Cyprus, the parents don't force religion on their children. In this school, instead of having to go to Orthodox religious class every day, the children could opt out and would do mathematics or some other subject instead. It is the same with their diet: the school gave the children lunch, but if they had a Muslim parent they wouldn't give them ham or pork. They are very open-minded in Cyprus.

I was happy with the school's attitude, because I would never

insult the fact that May is half Syrian. I liked to think that I was bringing her up with respect for both sides of her parentage, so that when she got older she had a taste of both cultures and could choose her own path in life.

She had been doing so well at preschool; the teachers there had told me that she was a very intelligent child and had a very high IQ. They loved May and she loved them. The school knew of the problems I'd had with Mostafa, as Social Services had informed them of the situation. I had experienced physical abuse at his hands over the years, but May had been given her own social worker after Mostafa hit me one day in one of his rages and struck May as well by mistake as she was sitting on my knee. It was a day I will never forget, as I had tried hard to conceal from my little girl all the abuse I'd had to endure over the years, both physical and mental. That day changed everything for her. I had never wanted her to witness any of his irate behaviour, because I didn't know how she would react to it. I didn't want her to fear him as I did, but my efforts to protect her were destroyed that day. She wasn't badly hurt – not physically, anyway – but I will never know how it affected her little mind. I'm sure that is something we will probably discuss as she gets older, something that she will lock away until she feels ready to open up.

Social Services had to be informed of the assault, and after it was all investigated they instructed the school never to allow May to leave the school with her father. The only person with permission to take her off the premises was myself.

May starting her new school, I could now see, was the main reason why he had taken her that day. It perhaps wasn't his main reason for abducting her, but it was definitely why he had to do it that day. He was so devious and controlling that he abducted his own flesh and blood, took her from her mammy and the comfort of her home to a war-torn country simply because he, a non-practising Muslim himself, wanted our little child to grow up as he saw fit: in his world, with his beliefs.

The hypocrisy of this man was sick, as he never practised his

faith, he never prayed on a prayer mat, he seldom went to the mosque or did anything to show he was a practising Muslim other than his not eating specific kinds of meat and demanding that I dress a certain way, yet suddenly he was pretending to be devout and wanted his daughter to grow up with a faith he had not adhered to himself. This was definitely one of the main reasons for turning our world upside down, and he didn't care who he hurt in the process.

The other reason was money. He had ordered me to sell everything I owned: that was the demand I had to meet if I ever wanted to see my little girl again. He'd instructed me to clear my bank account and bring him whatever money I had, so that we could live happily in a slum in Syria. And in his warped mind this order was meant to entice me to come to him. He knew the only reason I would ever obey any of his orders or demands would be to see my daughter again, and he was clever enough to know that the only way for me to see her was to do as he wished.

He sickened me to the pit of my stomach, but I had to try to put the deep hatred and abhorrence I was feeling for him at that moment to the back of my head. I knew that I needed to do whatever he asked of me if I was to see May again alive and well. I had no choice. And he knew that.

As the calls continued throughout the evening and on into the night, I somehow managed to keep Mostafa calm. I didn't want him to worry that I might have reported him to the authorities and so I tried my best to keep him onside. I warned him that it could take some time for me to sell everything before I could join him. I told him how I wanted to get there as soon as possible to be with May, but that I couldn't just sell everything overnight, it would take time. I did this because I knew that if I got inside Syria I would also be held captive, and myself and May would be sentenced to a Muslim way of life. I knew that we would be locked in his home and made to live a life where neither May nor I would ever have any rights. And I knew that if he had been violent to me in a European country

like Cyprus, he would stop at nothing to display his authority in his home country, where he, as a male, had all the rights and myself and May, as females, had none.

To give me time to work out the best options and to see if there was any way the Irish or Cypriot authorities could do anything to help us, I played a game.

I reassured him that I would take all of my life savings out of the bank as soon as I could and that I would make my way over to Syria. I knew that I had no choice in what I said and how I handled him: I had to think of May's safety at all times. I didn't want him to think I had any plan other than to get all the money I could together and to join him so that we could live together as a family again. The fact that we were legally divorced didn't come into the equation. To him, this was all a game and he held the trump card. He knew that I would do absolutely anything for my daughter. Admittedly, he probably still had feelings for me, but I knew that his main objective was to gain access to my money and to feel like he had beaten me by taking May. He knew only too well that my life revolved around my child and that nothing or no one could keep her from me. She was his ticket, as he saw it, to a cash windfall.

He might have had normal parental feelings for May, but I knew that primarily he was doing this to hurt me and to send me a clear message that, despite the fact that I had been given full guardianship of our daughter in court, he ruled our family. He was the person in full control now, and by taking May to Syria he was showing that he had won.

He knew that I would sell my soul for my child, but he also underestimated me. He hadn't realised how strong I had become since our divorce and that I would not only sell my soul for my child but, despite the circumstances, I would also risk my life to get her back.

He never thought I would plan to make my way into a Muslim stronghold, a blonde European mother, and a Catholic to boot. He totally underestimated a mother's love for her baby, and that was his biggest mistake in his otherwise faultless abduction plan.

THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE

All of the time I was playing him, trying to keep him onside to protect May and keep him calm, I was praying that the fact that May had an Irish passport meant that the Irish government could somehow move in and through diplomatic means they could demand the release of one of their citizens. But I was very wrong.

As Mandy made phone call after phone call back in Dublin, trying to get government ministers, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the media on board to help us, she was getting nowhere. I was on the phone to her every few minutes. I missed her more than ever before, as without my little girl I felt I was totally alone now in a foreign country, when all I wanted was to have my family around me to support me. I needed them to console me as I cried. I needed them to listen to me, face to face, not on a phone, where the conversation was manic at times. I wanted nothing more than to feel my dad's love: a father's love that my own child unfortunately had never felt. I was desperate.

Between the phone calls back and forth to politicians and doing interviews with Irish newspapers and radio stations, Mandy booked a flight to Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus. I knew that she had to first fly from Dublin to London, then wait for another flight to get to Cyprus, as direct flights from Ireland to Cyprus had stopped some time ago. Knowing Mandy, I bet that although she would be shattered from the long journey, she would still be charged up when she finally arrived, high on adrenalin caused by stress, and I knew that she would immediately be ready to start planning in depth how to get May back to us safely. I was so relieved that she would be with me soon and I started to count down the hours to her arrival. We spoke every hour at least.

Mandy was trying to keep Dad relaxed at the same time. She had to be honest with him but tried to keep all of the worrying details back from him. We were terrified that if Dad knew just how bad it was he would collapse from stress, so we had to keep him as calm as possible. My dad is a very quiet and

inoffensive man whose life was turned upside down when he lost my mam, and we cared for him as if he was another child. We knew we had to protect him from the whole truth, as he idolised May and he had always feared the worst would happen with Mostafa. Dad had seen through him nearly from day one.

Mandy's partner, Sean, was our saving grace for keeping Dad relaxed. Himself and Josh, Mandy's son from another relationship, who was just 16, agreed to take care of Dad while Mandy was away, as they lived in the same house. Mandy and Sean were saving for their wedding day in 2012, so they and Sean lived with Dad and looked after him. Mandy was a little bit more relaxed about leaving because she knew Dad was with the boys. Both Josh and Sean must have been terrified waving goodbye to Mandy at the airport, not knowing what was to lie ahead, but they knew she was determined to go to support me. A sister's love is incomparable to any other love in times of trouble, and I needed Mandy then more than ever before and she knew that.

While I waited for Mandy to arrive, I prayed and prayed that Mostafa would not hurt May. I was so grateful that at certain times when I rang he would let me talk to her, but I was worried sick, because although she claimed that she was OK, I could hear the fear in her little voice.

She would never let him know she was scared, though, I knew that. She had seen me play the game for years, trying to keep him calm when he was stressed out, and I could actually tell from the phone calls we had that she was doing exactly the same thing. She had obviously watched me before as I battled to keep him onside and she was clearly being nice to him to make him believe she was happy to be with him, to protect herself.

That first night without my child was the worst night of my life. I had never felt more alone. I stayed that night in a friend's house, and it was 4 a.m. before I actually went to bed. I was still ringing Mostafa every hour, checking if May was OK and trying to reassure him that it would all be fine as soon as I got

to Syria. He had started to panic a bit halfway through the night, and at one stage he actually said to me that he didn't know why he had done what he had done, but he knew that it was too late to turn back.

I kept playing the game. I kept telling Mostafa that it was all right and that I understood that he did what he did simply because he loved May. I had a lump in my throat saying those words and I can never explain the hatred I felt for him at that point, but I needed to keep on his side. My biggest fear was that he would totally panic and lose it and run. And if he ran he would take May with him, switch off his phone and I would never hear from him or see my daughter again. It was a real possibility, and I knew that I was the only one who could control the situation, not the authorities, not the police: it was up to me to keep him calm and keep my daughter alive and safe.

I reckon I only slept for about an hour that night. It was horrible. The next day I received a call from my solicitor. This man had handled all the proceedings for me when I was battling for custody and pleading with Social Services and the courts not to give Mostafa any visitation rights on his own. This man knew only too well what I'd had to endure with my ex-husband for the years prior to this, and I had phoned him as soon as I realised Mostafa had snatched my child. But it took him a whole 24 hours to return my call. I knew that it wasn't the time for arguing and so I didn't vent my frustration at his seeming lack of concern. I just listened to him telling me that it would all be fine and that he was sure I would have May back with me in two to three days. Hearing these words, I was relieved because they were coming from someone in the know, as far as I was concerned, so my level of hope rose dramatically.

He asked me to drop into his office for a chat if I got a chance but I knew exactly where I wanted to go that day. I had made it my priority to go to the offices of Social Services, to let them know what had happened, because I blamed them for not listening to me in the first place. I had warned them all that this could happen when they were looking at custody and

visitation rights, but no one had listened. Now it was too late. I really felt that they had let me down miserably. I went to the office and I spoke with our social worker and I told her that Mostafa had taken May. I said, 'I told you he was a flight risk. I told you all that he would take her and that's exactly what he has done.' I think they were all in shock.

I had asked them time and time again to assess him mentally, because I felt that he was unstable. In fact, I had requested on four different occasions that he be mentally assessed, and no one had listened.

The social worker immediately got annoyed at me and went on the defensive, shouting and roaring, trying to insist that this wasn't their fault. Then, suddenly, she started to calm down and she said that this was actually 'a good thing', as he would now immediately lose parental rights to May.

I remember thinking that it made absolutely no difference now, as I wasn't sure that I could ever get my child back from Mostafa. It was totally irrelevant now, because he was in Syria and, parental rights or no parental rights, the law there was on his side. He had all the rights in that territory and I had none. So unless I got him back to Cyprus with May, and I knew that wasn't going to happen, I was the one with no rights.

The social worker didn't want to get involved with the abduction because, she said, my case was now closed, but she gave me a few hints on what I should do and where I should go. I was hoping that any advice she could give me would be helpful, but it was all too little too late. May was gone, and as far as I knew it was now out of the control of the Cypriot government. When I left her office I was feeling very low. It seemed no one could help me in Cyprus and so I went straight to my solicitor's office to see if he could offer any more assistance and give me more hope. All he could do was say that I would get her back. He couldn't tell me how, just that it would happen. I left his office very depressed, knowing deep inside that all I could do at this stage was wait.

CHAPTER TWO



The Plan

When Mandy arrived in Limassol on Thursday night I was so relieved. I literally fell into her arms, sobbing uncontrollably and shaking with grief. My friend had picked up Mandy and our first cousin Natasha at the airport and then brought them to me, as I was in the CID office.

I remember thinking how composed I was at this meeting, prior to Mandy's arrival, as I gave a statement to the police in English. I had a Cypriot translator who ensured that every word I said was taken down accurately in Greek and not misunderstood. Her attendance at this meeting made sure there would be no way that anyone could say later on that something I told them during the interview was lost in translation.

But when Mandy walked through the door, all of my emotions exploded. I sobbed like the rain, and at one stage I looked at the translator and she was crying. I think she suddenly realised the seriousness of the issue and that the abduction was not a fear, it was a reality.

I can honestly say that at times it felt as if May was dead. Not having her beside me, not being able to touch her, to hug her, left me feeling like I had lost my little girl for ever. Having

my sister beside me didn't make up for that loss, but I knew that she would help me to cope with everything so much easier.

On a few occasions when I stopped for a minute or two, I would think to myself, 'How can he be so gullible as to accept that I am just getting on with my life without May?' I couldn't understand how he could believe that I was so calm when I knew she was in a war-torn country where everything was so volatile that she could be killed at any moment. I just didn't comprehend how his mind worked.

I continued to push the authorities in Cyprus to try to get May out of Syria as soon as possible, but it became clear, very fast, that I was getting nowhere.

Mandy told me how the media in Ireland had been brilliant and how every newspaper in the country was covering the story. We'd had to contact the newspapers in order to put pressure on the authorities to help us. Because I had purposely cancelled May's passport 18 months previously, fearing that this very situation could happen, Mandy had requested a new passport for her. But she had been told categorically that it was impossible for the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to reissue a new passport without both parents' signature on the form.

I could not believe what I was hearing. How the hell could they justify what they were saying? I was May's mother and I had full guardianship of her. I had cancelled her passport myself with the Irish embassy in Nicosia after completing all the necessary documents in my local police station, and she was also on a stop list that prevented her leaving the country without written consent from both her parents, because of my concerns for her safety. Despite this, Mostafa had abducted our child, and was wanted for her kidnap in Cyprus and had somehow managed to get her through two borders on a cancelled passport, yet he would have to sign a form to get her a new passport so that I could rescue her from her abductor: *him*.

At that stage, I thought I would lose all hope. My own

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country, the country where May had been born, could not help us. Why? I kept asking myself this over and over again. I had seen films and read books in which you see the authorities in whatever jurisdiction an abduction took place doing everything they can for the mother of the child and eventually getting the child back, but I was being told, straight out, that there was nothing they could do for me or May.

That was when we really decided to pull in the help of the media to highlight the case, to put pressure on the authorities. I was disgusted that we had to go down that road, but we felt that we had no choice. In fairness to the Irish media, most of them were absolutely fantastic and did everything they could for us, putting pressure on the Department of Foreign Affairs, demanding to know why this little Irish child could not be looked after and why her passport could not be issued. They were amazing.

It was Friday now: we had gone for three days in Cyprus with absolutely no contact from the Cypriot police. We didn't know what, if anything, they were doing to try to locate my child. It was very frustrating. We had seen no one from the Irish Embassy in Nicosia either. We had thought that having an Irish government representative in the same country that we were living in would help us as well, but we were wrong there also, because during those nightmare days we saw no one and heard nothing. It was so upsetting, because I felt that we had been abandoned.

We were very careful to keep all media coverage away from Cyprus, because we feared that if Mostafa heard there was publicity in newspapers or on radio about the abduction of an Irish child in Cyprus he would just flee. Then everything would change and we would have lost little May for ever. So we asked the Irish media who printed newspapers for sale in Cyprus and Turkey, like the *Irish Sun* and the *Irish Mirror*, not to allow the story to leak into these editions and, thank God, they didn't. They were fantastic.

The pressure the journalists were putting on the Irish

authorities finally resulted in a phone call from the Irish government on Friday. It had taken that long for a response. But despite a promise from an official that he would ring back later that day, it never happened.

We were getting used to these empty promises by this stage. The Irish weren't the only ones deserting us. Up until Saturday we had no visits from the Cypriot police, even though we had contacted them to tell them that we were being followed by associates of Mostafa who had seen us go into and leave the CID office on Friday. We had told them that we were absolutely terrified, that we knew that these guys were following us to report everything back to Mostafa and that they were capable of doing anything to us. We were frightened that they could force their way into the house and maybe beat us up, kill us even, we didn't know what they were capable of, but I knew only too well that honour amongst these men was everything and that they were protecting their friend and fellow countryman. I knew that every little move we made was being reported back daily, if not hourly, to Syria, but the Cypriot police never came to see if we were OK or offered us any form of security. We were on our own and that was being made very clear to us.

On Friday afternoon while I was sitting in the house I got a phone call from Mostafa's first cousin. I didn't know why he was ringing me, but he said he had my car and he asked me where he should leave it. Mostafa had obviously decided that I should get the car back, the car that he had used to kidnap my child, in which he had taken her to the Cypriot-Turkish border, and I was to sell it to get some more money to bring to Syria with me. I was absolutely devastated.

When Mostafa's cousin arrived, I went out to meet him at the door. I watched him take all of May's little bits and pieces from the car, her kiddies' rucksack with her little bikini, her packed lunch untouched and her suncream still unopened. He literally walked in and, without a second thought, threw the bag into the hall. I knew that he was trying to make his way

into the house to see who was there, because he was looking all around the apartment as he entered into the hall, so I asked him if he would go out to the car to get me something I thought might be still there. I used this as an opportunity to run inside and tell Mandy and Natasha to hide in the back room. I knew he would come into the main living area to have a good look around, but I was sure that he wouldn't go into the bedroom. And, just as I had anticipated, he came into the apartment and looked all around to see if anything looked out of place or if anyone was around.

Thankfully, all was quiet, and as brazen as you like he took out his mobile phone and he dialled Mostafa. He obviously didn't realise that I could speak some Arabic and understood it quite well, because in Arabic he told Mostafa that everything was OK and there was no one in the apartment. I knew that my ex-husband had obviously directed him to check out the house and that he would be reassured by confirmation that there were no police around and nothing suspicious happening.

I rang Mostafa later that night and he was in an awful state: he was really emotional, crying and very agitated. He said that he knew that we had been to the CID office on Wednesday. It turned out that a friend of his had been arrested that day and happened to be in the station and overheard everything. Mostafa was panicking, thinking that there was a warrant out for his arrest. I tried to appease him, telling him that everything was fine and that I had called in to CID in a panic on Wednesday, as I thought back then that he had kidnapped May because I couldn't get him on the phone. But I told him that I had contacted them straight away once he had been in touch with me and I had informed them that everything was OK now. I told him no charges had been filed. He seemed to believe me and he appeared to relax a little.

Myself, Mandy and Tash went to sleep on Friday night feeling totally dejected. I felt as though someone had pulled a plug on me and my energy levels were zapped. I was having a lot of discomfort from my hips and my back, and even sitting down

for long periods was affecting me. I was due to have a double hip replacement the following week, but all I could think about at this stage was getting May back. I knew that the operation was definitely not going to happen now, even though I had built myself up so much for having it done, and I was looking forward to a new way of life for myself and May with my new mobility.

I was also hoping that cancer tests I'd recently had would come back negative, but to be honest I couldn't even think about the consequences if they weren't. There were much more important things to sort now.

All of my efforts were now directed in one way, and nothing could get me to deviate from that. I tried to get some sleep that night, but once again my mind was racing and my thoughts were all about May. Needless to say, when I woke the next day I was very low. I felt hopeless.

We sat down, all three of us, and we agreed that we were on our own in this. No one was going to help us, and the only option we had was to go it alone.

And so we started to make our own plans. An aunt of ours who had been constantly on the phone offering support throughout this ordeal loved to visit Turkey. She went there a few times every year and had a lot of friends who had a lot of contacts. She told us that she knew a Turkish man who might be able to help us. She had been talking to him on the phone earlier and he had told her to give his number to us and he would see what he could do. There were a lot of Syrians living in Turkey as well as in Cyprus, as they tend to go to stay in countries not too far from Syria once they leave or escape. Our aunt was thinking that some of the Turkish men he knew might know of a way to get into Syria without being arrested and that they might be able to snatch May from Mostafa's house and get her back into Turkey.

Parts of Turkey bordered Syria, and it looked like this could be a good way of getting May back if the legal route wasn't working. I knew that these guys, if this man knew them, would

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be illegal people smugglers and would probably have to be paid in advance, but I was prepared to give every last cent I had to get my child back in my arms. I didn't care how illegal it was to pay these smugglers. I had foolishly put my trust in the authorities and they had let me down badly. I knew that if I waited for them to move, if they ever did, it could be too late.

Immediately, I picked up the phone and I dialled the Turkish number our aunt had given us. The guy answered, and when I told him exactly what had happened and where Mostafa had taken May, his response was, 'Why didn't you call me earlier? I will get some men over there and we will snatch her back for you.' Needless to say, I was over the moon. This was the first really positive response I'd had in days, and I really felt this would work. He said he would sort the men out and get back to me with a price. At that stage I would give him all the information I had on Mostafa, exactly where the house was and so on, and they would tell me where to send the money to.

Having had so many disappointments in the last few days, Mandy and I decided that we would come up with Plan B just in case Plan A failed. We knew it would be very messy, but we decided to pack some clothes and head to Turkey ourselves, so that if all else failed at least I would be nearer to Syria if I could persuade Mostafa to come to the border to meet me.

I knew he wanted me to stay in Cyprus until I had sold everything, including my cars, a BMW and a Honda Logo, and had taken any money I had from the bank. The apartment I lived in was rented, so he knew that I didn't have any money in property, but he just wanted everything he could get his hands on. I decided that I could convince him that I needed to leave Mandy in Limassol to sell everything, including any furniture I had, because it wouldn't sell overnight and I needed someone whom I could trust to make sure they got the best price for everything I had. I trusted my friends in Limassol with all my heart, but I needed to use Mandy as my lifesaver when it came to Mostafa, because if I managed to get into Syria, he would need to allow me to have contact

with Mandy all the time on the phone because she was his passport to cash.

Myself and Mandy started to pack a few bits and pieces. Tash was to travel back to Dublin, and her job was to reassure everyone back home that we were both OK. She was in bits leaving us, but we couldn't risk anything happening to her; we didn't want to jeopardise her safety as well. But, as sisters, Mandy and I would stick together – at least until we got to the border of Syria and Turkey, where we both knew we would have the very hard task of saying goodbye to each other. Hopefully it would be for just a short time, but realistically we both knew that it could be for ever. We would deal with that if and when the time came, although we both knew it was on our minds every step of the way.

We honestly didn't know where we were going exactly, or how we were going to get there, but we did know that the journey we were about to take would not be a pleasant one for either of us. We could read each other's minds, but neither of us mentioned the unmentionable. We just got stuck into organising our passports and money and picking out some clothes that would not make us look too much like European tourists.

I rang my friend again, and he had a contact who was a Turkish-Syrian Cypriot. He arranged for this man to take us that afternoon to the Cypriot-Turkish border, as he knew the route very well. This would mean we could take a flight from somewhere within the northern territories, which were effectively under Turkey's control, to somewhere near the Turkish-Syrian border. There was no direct flight into Turkey from Larnaca or anywhere in Cyprus because of the tense atmosphere between Cyprus and Turkey over ownership of land. The north of Cyprus was really operated by Turks and therefore our only way into Turkey was through this route. This man, we were told, would take us all the way to an area not too far from Nicosia, where we would then take one, maybe two flights to get us to a town near the Turkish border with

Syria. The prospects of doing all this alone with my sister were terrible, but we had to put our fears behind us.

That Saturday afternoon, the Turkish-Syrian man, who I had never met before, arrived at the apartment to pick us up. I had to trust this man even though he was a complete stranger. Despite my concerns, I convinced myself that my friend would never put us in danger and this man must be someone he trusted implicitly. One way or another, the plan was made, and I wasn't about to chicken out now. We knew we were extremely lucky to be getting a driver at all, never mind a local driver who knew the best and safest routes to take, to get us to where we needed to be.

Once in the car we drove for about one hundred kilometres through Cyprus towards Nicosia, the capital. After a while it became clear that we were entering an area that was not habitable. Suddenly we were in an area with fewer houses and shops; it was mostly just fields and derelict sites. I was aware that this area was quite dangerous. It was basically a no-man's-land. We had left civilisation, as I knew it, behind a few miles away from this place.

We drove up to the Cypriot border in a semi-built area of Nicosia and then into the UN-controlled section of the border. Oddly enough, this is still a very dangerous area, as anyone in Cyprus will tell you. The terrain is still covered in landmines and is extremely dangerous for people who do not know about them.

As we approached the border, which was straddled on either side by two white houses that were probably used by the border control, we saw a man sitting down smoking a cigarette. He was sitting in a makeshift border-control box and we started to get our passports ready for inspection. But he never even looked up at us; we simply drove through.

At this stage we had driven through the Cyprus border area and into UN territory. I knew I was in a UN base, but we didn't see one soldier along the stretch of road. All we saw was just a big field with barbed wire along the route. But as far as Mandy

and myself were concerned we were one step nearer to my little girl and the relief was already hitting us.

We proceeded on for about 500 metres up the road when suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a queue of cars. It just hit us from out of the blue, as it had been desolate all the way along until then. As we got nearer to the outposts, the driver turned around to us and asked for our passports, which we gave him. He got out of the car and walked up to an area where there were four or five different passport-control boxes. We were straining our heads to see what he was doing, but at the same time we didn't want to bring any attention to ourselves, and within five minutes or so he was walking back to the car. We suddenly realised that nothing was certain and, in fact, there was a possibility that we might not actually get a visa to enter Turkey. These things do happen; we just had to pray there wouldn't be a problem. There was no way of knowing how it had gone as the driver approached the car, as his face gave nothing away. With our stomachs sick, we watched him casually pull on his seat belt and start the car up again. With that, he simply turned around to us, handed back our passports, which had been stamped, along with the visas, and said nothing.

We proceeded to drive into what was technically another country with no one checking Mandy and myself to see if we were the passport holders. There were no checks at all on us. It proved there and then how easy it had been for Mostafa to take my baby away from me through not one but two foreign countries with no passport (or, if he had her passport, it was a cancelled one). I remember Mandy and I simply looking at one another with disgust. We could say nothing as we sat in the back of this man's car, because we were with a stranger who we couldn't trust 100 per cent, but it was sickening to think how easily we had done it.

We carried on driving for about half an hour through rough ground, making our way to Ercan airport in the occupied north of Cyprus. The driver pulled in when we reached the airport and told us to go on in to see which flights we could get to

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somewhere close to Syria in Turkey while he parked the car.

Myself and Mandy walked around all the flight desks, explaining that we needed to book a flight for two people to the closest point to the Syrian border. At each and every desk they looked at these two blonde Irish women as if we were mad. One agent told us that we would have to stay overnight in Ercan and take a flight the next morning. Thankfully our driver came in and he asked the rep which was the best route to the Syrian border, and he was told that we could take a flight within an hour with Turkish Airlines first to Istanbul and then on to another flight to a place called Adana. This city was roughly 160 miles away from the Syrian border. We were shocked at how the airline staff had so easily dismissed us simply because we were Western women but also delighted that we had someone with us who could actually work on our behalf. We checked in our luggage and boarded our 9 p.m. flight to Istanbul. It was a two-hour flight, and though we were drained, myself and Mandy spent the whole time chatting about how I would try to get May out of Syria if the Turkish people smugglers let us down. We were still very hopeful that Plan A would work, but, like most things in life, there was always a slight worry that something could go wrong and so I had to prepare myself for that.

We tried to doze off for a few minutes, but the tiredness had worn off and we were high on stress, just counting the minutes, not the hours, until we got to Istanbul before we jumped on our next flight.

All the time I was worrying about Mostafa, as I had turned my phone off in case he rang me and heard us driving along in a car or heard an intercom at the airport. I was paranoid that he would hear something he shouldn't, making him panic and flee with May.

Luckily, we had been thinking on our feet before we left. I had given my friend a key to the house and told her that if Mostafa rang the house phone she was to tell him that I had got sick again and collapsed and ended up back in hospital. I

thought that this would put him off the scent for a while, as I knew that his mind would go into overdrive if he wasn't able to get me on the phone. If nothing else, this story would buy me a little time, as long as he didn't think of ringing the hospital to check that I was there. That was something I never even considered until much later.

We finally got to Adana at 12.30 a.m. – drained! What we didn't know until later was that Adana is a mostly Kurdish-controlled area, mainly occupied by Turks and Arabs. It is a very volatile part of Turkey where trouble could break out at any time and where women get very little respect, especially Western women travelling alone; therefore, two blonde Irish women in European clothes would stick out like a sore thumb.

We walked outside the very small airport and onto the street, and even though it was the dead of night we could see that we were in what could only be described as a very poor-looking area. It just looked very desolate, and any women we saw were well covered up in the hijab or burka. The men were dressed in sandals and typical Turkish robes or long clothing, and some wore fezzes. We stood to have a cigarette outside and decided that we had no choice but to stay in a hotel that night and begin planning our next move after a sleep.

All this time I was worrying frantically over May. I knew it had been a whole day since she had spoken to me and I hoped that she didn't think I had abandoned her. I was also worrying about Mostafa, praying that he wasn't letting his mind run away with him because he was unable to contact me. My head was filled with all sorts of scenarios, none of them good.

As we stood smoking, myself and Mandy, a taxi pulled up in front of us and the driver jumped out and opened the door. I think he was very surprised to see us there, two women in a strict Muslim area who looked completely out of their comfort zone. We asked him to take us to the best hotel he knew. He nodded, and after a few minutes' drive we arrived at the Airport Hotel.

We were absolutely starving as we hadn't eaten all day, so we

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asked the man in the lobby where we could get some food, seeing as it was the early hours of the morning. He looked at us as if we each had two heads and in broken English he said, 'You cannot go outside of the hotel. You are two Western women, blonde women, it is too dangerous.'

We were fit to collapse with hunger and tiredness combined. I think he saw the dejection on our faces, and though he said nothing he came back about 45 minutes later with some beers and chips he had cooked himself. We paid him about 20 euros and we were absolutely delighted with our little feast. It felt as if someone had just handed us a thousand euros.

We sat in our rooms and we demolished those chips. We were delighted to have been eating anything. We were obviously very naive to think we could just go out onto the street at 1.30 a.m. in a city of 1.6 million people, the fifth largest city in Turkey as I found out much later, and be safe. We were very grateful that we had chosen this particular hotel, because any other hotel manager would have probably started to ask questions as to why we were there, where we were travelling to and so on, so we got lucky that night.

However, the hotel was extremely basic. There were no luxuries, and you basically had to just be grateful that you had a bed and a toilet and shower in the room – and we were. Luxuries were the last thing on our minds that night.

The next morning while I was getting ready, Mandy went down to the hotel reception and spoke to another man on duty. She asked him how we could get to the Syrian border. They were astonished that she wanted to go into Syria, but she didn't tell them our reasons for going, she just said we needed to get as near to the Syrian border as possible.

The hotel porter on duty said he could get a driver to bring us right down to a place called Hatay Province. This is an area that used to be owned by the Syrian government, and Syrians call it Liwa' aliskenderun. It was the cause of much dispute over the last few decades in particular, but tensions had eased in more recent times. A law requiring people from Turkey or

Syria to hold visas if they were travelling back or forth across the border was stopped in early 2009, and these people were finally told that they could pass without problems to visit family either side of the border over the Christmas holidays or Eid. Eid is a religious holiday celebrated each year by Muslims, and it is a hugely important family time for them. The opening of the border during this time frame was seen as a huge stepping stone towards improving Syrian–Turkish relations.

We were advised by the hotel porter that this area was still extremely dangerous, especially for women travelling alone. We knew that there would be very few places that would not be dangerous on our travels, and I had decided that once in Hatay Province I would look for a hijab to wear as I travelled across the border. It might not be a lifesaver, but I knew wearing the garment might make my crossing slightly safer.

We were told that it was roughly 192 kilometres from Adana to Hatay and it would take up to two and a half hours to get there by car, but that the driver who would take us there was very trustworthy and we would not be in danger with him. This distance meant nothing to us at this stage, and once again we had no choice but to put our trust in yet another stranger.

As I saw it, Mostafa Assad was an embarrassment to his culture, and he gave a bad impression of Middle Eastern society and people. Over the last 24 hours, I had encountered Middle Eastern men who had helped us with no questions asked as we attempted to travel to an Islamic culture while dressed in Western clothes and with no explanation as to why we needed to get there. They all wanted to know, I am sure of that, but so far we had got help at every place we stopped and as yet nothing bad had happened to us. I thanked God for being with us every step of the way and once again put my trust in him that this new driver would be just as trustworthy as the people we had met along the way to date.

Myself and Mandy got our bags from the room, paid the hotel porter and waited for the driver to arrive. He took our bags and put them into the boot of an old car. He didn't say

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much to us, but we handed him over 100 euros before we drove off and just hoped that he wouldn't leave us stranded along the way. I asked him to take us to the best hotel in Hatay and he told us, in Arabic, that he knew of a very good four-star hotel and that it was very nice. Myself and Mandy tried to remain positive as we looked at each other, because a four-star hotel in Turkey is definitely not what we call a four-star hotel in other European countries. The last hotel was allegedly four-star as well, but it resembled nothing more than a bed and breakfast, and a bad one at that. However, beggars can't be choosers, and we had been delighted the previous night, not just for the bed but for feeling somewhat safe.

The journey took us through a very mountainous area with barren land all around us. It was obvious on leaving Adana how huge the city was and how commercialised it was compared with other parts of Turkey. It was also obvious, however, that the Muslim influence was very much a big part of this particular area of Turkey, as women were either fully covered up in burkas or were wearing headscarves and were covered from the neck down.

We stopped at a little shop, a very basic place, to get drinks and to use the toilets, and I will never forget Mandy's face when she saw we had to wee into what was literally a hole in the floor. It was primitive, to say the least.

We noticed a lot of trucks along the route, and as we approached Hama itself the traffic became quite heavy, with lots of commercial vehicles seemingly heading for the Syrian border town.

When we eventually arrived at the Buyuk Hotel, after roughly two hours in the car, the driver took our bags from the boot, walked us into the lobby and organised a room for us. We thanked him and proceeded to check in.

We were very hot, as we had travelled non-stop in a car where the air conditioning didn't appear to be working, and opening the window just made it even hotter. There was nowhere we could have stopped along the way for a coffee, not like at home;

there had been a few little makeshift shops along the route, but we didn't see anywhere selling coffee. Luckily we had packed some bottles of water and we sipped them as we drove along. We hadn't eaten breakfast at all that morning, we simply drank some very strong Turkish coffee as we stood outside the hotel door and hoped that we would be able to go for a walk in this town to buy some food for the room and look to buy a hijab. Looking around us, though, it was clear that of all places we had visited to date, Hatay Province was a very strict Islamic area.

When we eventually made our way up to the bedroom, we were shocked to see that it was even more basic than the last one. There was, once again, cheap carpet laid on the floor but it hadn't even been cut properly and it extended up the walls. In the bathroom, there were no shampoos or any little luxuries you would expect in a four-star hotel, just cheap bars of soap. But the bed linen and towels appeared to be clean, and the room was neat. A bonus was that we had a TV and it had BBC World News. We were delighted to be able to hear English voices. We knew at this stage that beggars couldn't be choosers so we simply made the best of what we had. We got a mobile phone signal too, which was a blessing, as we knew that we had to seriously up our game now and start putting our plans into place.

We woke to the sound of prayers from the mosque, and those prayers continued throughout the day intermittently. For someone not used to this lifestyle it was quite frightening and, to be honest, I was terrified.

There are more than 540 miles of border between Turkey and Syria, and Hatay Province occupies 50 or so miles of this land, maybe more if you take in the sea areas. Nearly all refugees trying to flee Syria use the Hatay area to make their escape. Many thousands have taken the route over the years and many have lost their lives trying, but on 20 June 2011 the border had been closed because the Syrian government was trying to control the mass exodus. There were no 'good news' stories in

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Syria, that was for sure, and President Bashar al-Assad knew this, so he ordered a total ban on foreign journalists entering the country. As the fighting and street protests escalated in cities and towns the length and breadth of the country, border controls were tightened.

I knew that this was happening because I had been following the news on TV throughout Turkey as we travelled along. I was watching CNN and Fox News, and I knew that it wasn't looking good. But this escalation in violence in Syria made it even more necessary for me to go in and save my child if the Turkish people smugglers failed to help us. It was still Plan B, but we both knew that it could very well become a possibility if all else failed.

I knew that if it came to it that Mandy would be terrified for my safety and that of May, but I had to keep reminding Mandy that she had a child herself and I knew that in a similar situation she would do exactly what I was doing. Reluctantly, she agreed, but she was also terrified of what could be lying ahead for both May and myself. That was if I actually managed to get into Syria at all, given the high security at the checkpoints.

Since May had been kidnapped, I often lay in bed at night hoping to God that she was safe and that she couldn't hear gunshots or see people being shot dead in the streets. Bad as he was, I hoped that Mostafa would shelter her as much as possible from witnessing any of the violence erupting. I knew other children living in Syria would be used to this sort of volatile situation, not that this was any consolation to them, but my little girl was used to a nice quiet life, going to the beach every day, playing with her friends and eating healthy dinners and ice cream for a treat. Now I dreaded to think what she was witnessing. But despite everything on the TV and everything I was hearing from home, I was determined to get in there and save her.

I was now fewer than 40 miles away from the dividing line between civilisation and war. But to me it was the dividing line between life and death, because without my little girl I might

as well have been dead. She was my life and I needed to save hers. That was the bottom line.

We settled down in the room and took out the laptop. Thank God we were thinking on our feet and had taken it with us from Cyprus. We weren't sure if we could get an Internet connection along the way, but thankfully when we turned the laptop on the Internet worked.

We started to look at stories in the news on Syria, finding out exactly what the latest updates were. We also emailed family at home, letting them know that we were safe and telling everyone to take care of our dad. He was still our big concern, as we knew he would be worried sick with both of his daughters alone in a foreign country and his only granddaughter kidnapped by a father she feared and taken to a country savaged by war. We had been talking to Sean and Josh over the last few days while we were travelling and we had spoken to Dad, too, trying to keep him calm, saying we were fine and urging him not to worry.

At one stage we turned on the TV in the bedroom and watched the coverage of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 bombings in the States. I have to say that was a horrible thing to have to watch. Especially as we had been there, in New York, when it happened. I remember saying to Mandy how odd it was to be sitting there watching the news unfold, because if I had been in Dublin we would have been doing the very same thing, probably watching that very same station. If I had been in Cyprus, I would have been watching it with my dad and his friend. But it was all so different now.

Back home, our aunt was still trying every avenue to get the Irish government to help, but she was getting nowhere fast. While we were in the hotel we got a call from the Department of Foreign Affairs advising us that they were doing everything they could, but that it wasn't easy. They were still having problems getting May a passport because, even though her father kidnapped her, the Irish government, which ruled the department, was still insisting that he would have to sign papers

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to get a new passport issued. We were distraught, as we knew this would definitely never happen.

Just drained by it all, I contacted our new 'friend' in Turkey who was supposed to be organising the people smugglers to get May out. I told him that I was now only a few miles from the Syrian border and that I would wait here until the men snatched May. Then they could bring her straight to me in Hatay or I could get nearer to the border at Reyhanli/Bab al-Hawa quite easily once I knew they had her. I asked this man how things were progressing with the group of men he was organising for the escape plan. All of a sudden, the goalposts started to shift in what was supposed to be an easy job for him to organise, and he started making excuses, saying that the escape plan was proving harder than he had expected. There were bigger risks than he had thought for the men. He said that because of the extremely volatile area where Mostafa lived, he was having problems getting men to agree to go in and risk their lives. He said that he needed more time to sort things out and that he was still trying to get three or four guys onside to organise an escape plan. We realised that this man was not telling us everything, and we started to wonder if he was just acting the 'big guy', pretending he had contacts and that he could organise an escape. We got very worried.

After that conversation, myself and Mandy just sat on the bed looking at each other, not knowing what to do next, not knowing what to say. I remember looking at Mandy's face and seeing the sheer exhaustion etched on it with every line. She looked absolutely shattered, but that night more than ever I was so grateful to her for being with me. I realised that she had put her own life in danger to come this far, and I knew that although she absolutely loved me she was also worried sick about her own safety and would be thinking that if anything happened to her, Josh would be alone and Dad would be distraught.

For now, we needed to bide our time and give our Turkish contact a little longer to organise a rescue plan for us. We hadn't

been given a price from him either and judging by the last conversation any price he'd had in his head was about to go up as the risk of danger rose. So I rang my friend back in Cyprus and asked her to ring Mostafa again and tell him that I was still in hospital, sedated, but that I should be able to ring him if I was OK the next morning. She was a great friend and she did what I asked.

We got back onto the Cypriot police as well but realised that there was no help coming from their end. They did not even offer a slight ray of hope for us. Up until then I know we had both been hoping and praying that the Turkish guys would get to the border and go across, snatch May and bring her back out to me in Hatay. But, judging by the last phone call, this hope seemed to be fading fast. I think at that stage we knew that time was ticking away and that I would have no choice but to go into Syria and face whatever there was to face.

Here we were, two sisters in a deplorable hotel room, if you could even call it that, on the border of a strange, war-torn country, and we had no plan that we knew would get myself and May home to Ireland safely and put Mandy's mind at rest. Although I knew that I had to face Plan B now and walk into a living hell, because that is how I envisaged Syria, I also knew that poor Mandy would somehow have to make her way all the way back along the same route we had just taken to get a flight back to Ireland, alone.

Mandy and myself just sat there on the bed in silence for a good ten minutes, neither of us knowing what to say but both of us knowing what had to happen next.

I explained to Mandy that I felt as if I had no choice but to risk my life and try crossing the border. She was in an awful state, crying and hugging me, but I felt as though I was losing May, and my hopes of her being rescued by these Turkish guys were fading fast.

We knew that if I went in, we had the mobile phones to chat on, but we had to play that very safely as well if I did get into Syria. Apart from Mostafa hearing us speak, I was also worried

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about whether the Syrian government was tapping the phones of Westerners entering the country. I knew that anything was possible, so if I went in Mandy and I had to plan our steps with military precision to protect everyone involved. I decided that if I did go across I would let the Turkish contact know in advance, and Mandy could keep him updated after she had phoned me. Mandy would communicate everything to me, as we would have our own coded way of talking to each other and getting messages across. We had decided to do this because although Mostafa knew that I needed to be in touch with Mandy by phone because she was supposed to be selling up all that I owned in Cyprus so that she could send the money on to me to give to him, I knew that he would be listening and hanging on to my every word as we spoke. So we had come up with a code whereby if Mandy asked me if I felt OK and if my back or hips were bothering me and I said I was sore, that meant the opposite, as in I am OK, he is not being aggressive towards me and you are not to worry.

I knew that we could plan an escape all we liked, for just May and myself to run, but the likelihood of that happening was extremely low in such a volatile country, and a strictly Islamic country where the women and children did everything with their men and rarely got out alone.

That night, neither of us slept. The thought of what was about to happen haunted the night for us both. We were always extremely close as sisters, best friends really. We had only fallen out once in 30-odd years, albeit for a long time, and it had all been about Mostafa and how my sister and family felt he was ruling my life. But Mandy and I were never closer than that night.

I knew Mandy feared that even if Mostafa didn't kill me, I would lose my life anyway in Syria, either through war or from the oppression Mostafa would force on me. She felt I was in a no-win situation and as we both tried to doze off I knew that we were both praying for the same thing: that these Turks would live up to their promise and that at daylight I would

receive a call to say they were on their way. It was a dream that we both knew in our hearts would probably never come to fruition, but we lived in hope. I had already planned to give May's little toy Justin to the smugglers to take in with them as reassurance that her mammy had sent them to rescue her and she wasn't being snatched by total strangers. I just prayed and prayed that early the next morning the phone would ring and Plan A would be up and running. But, in reality, I wasn't too hopeful.

As we woke the next morning we grabbed the mobile phone to make sure we had not missed any texts from our Turkish contact. When there was nothing, we knew what we had to do.

We got dressed and went down for breakfast, which consisted of strong coffee, bread and jam, and then we headed out to do some shopping for a hijab. We went to an ATM and Mandy suggested that I take two or three thousand euros from my account, but I knew that life was cheap in Syria and so I decided to take out five hundred euros and the equivalent in Turkish lira, so that we had two denominations in case some people we met and needed help from along the way wanted a specific currency as payment. I put the euros in one cup of my bra and the lira in the other cup.

As we walked through the shops in our regular Western-style clothing, our appearance attracted attention. We stuck out a mile, but we carried on, ignoring the whispers and the stares as much as we could. We looked at the prices of the hijabs and they were absolutely ridiculous. They wanted 80 to 100 dollars for an ordinary garment, and I felt that we were being totally ripped off because they saw us as tourists, so we left the shopping. I decided that I would just cover up as much as I could in my own clothes to get across the border, because I knew that once there Mostafa would have clothing that he felt I should wear – appropriate clothing, as he would see it – already waiting for me. I was also concerned about handing out such a large amount of money for clothes, as we were trying to hold on to cash to pay for flight money for Mandy and the likes

of the Turkish guys, and all of our money was being eaten up as it was on taxis, planes and accommodation.

We headed back to the hotel and we decided that I would ring Mostafa and tell him where I was. I was doing this very reluctantly, but both Mandy and I knew that it had to be done. When he answered the phone he sounded frantic and he asked where I was. When I told him Hatay, he didn't even question how I had got there, even though I was meant to be in a Cypriot hospital up until last night. He just said, 'You are only half an hour away from me, Louise.' I played on his insecurities, because he hated me being anywhere on my own where there could be men, so I said, 'Please come and get me, Mostafa. I am very scared. There are loads of strange men around, and I am worried sick.'

I asked him to come across the border into Turkey to talk to me. I was shocked when he said he would, and he told me to give him five minutes: he would ring back. I thought that he wanted to try to organise something, but I soon realised something more important and much more dangerous had just evolved.

Within minutes, he rang me back. It appeared that a call had been waiting to come through to his phone while he was speaking to me, and it was a call that was to dash all of my plans. If I hadn't acted as I did, it was a call that could have put not only my life but also May's in jeopardy.

When I answered the phone, Mostafa started to scream and shout. He was like a madman. He said he had received a call from Interpol asking about my whereabouts. He immediately thought that I had reported him for kidnapping May. My stomach flipped over. I was holding the phone slightly away from my own ear so that Mandy could also hear what he was saying. We both froze. I saw Mandy's eyes widen in shock and she put her hand to her mouth in disbelief. We were in trouble now.

I don't know how I thought of it, but I seemed to immediately blurt out, 'Mostafa. Hang on a minute. Don't be panicking. I'll

get to the bottom of this. No one knows anything, there must be an explanation.' He was ranting and raving, so I said, 'Give me the number and I will ring them and see what is wrong. It is nothing for you to be worried about. It's obviously nothing to do with you because they don't know anything.' He seemed slightly more relaxed and he told me to ring him straight back.

The number they had called from was Cypriot. In a temper and totally fuming, I dialled the number. I don't think I even took a breath. I told the man on the phone who I was. He replied, 'Louise, we have been trying to contact you and your phone was off.'

I replied, 'My daughter has been kidnapped and you have just rung her abductor. I want to talk to your supervisor.'

He replied, 'No, you can't.' And with that, he put the phone down on me.

At that stage I just wanted to scream. I could not believe how Interpol had just gone and messed everything up for me. I knew that Mostafa would panic, and I was terrified that he wouldn't believe whatever excuse I gave him and that he might just pack his bag and run with May. I was worried sick that he might think it was a set-up and that they might trace his phone. In his mind, that would mean they could be looking for him right there and then, that they could possibly even be on the way to arrest him.

Mandy was frantic. But I had to think quickly. I immediately redialled Mostafa's number and I said, 'Mostafa, thank God it's all OK. Nothing to worry about. Basically, my dad hasn't heard from either Mandy or myself for days now and he was worried sick so he contacted Interpol. It's OK now. I have told them we are fine and that I will be in touch with my dad. Do you really think they would ring your number, tipping you off, if they were trying to find *you*! Would you not be so ridiculous, you are panicking for nothing.'

So that appeased him a bit and calmed him down, but then he said, 'That has just unnerved me a little, so now instead of me coming over the border to you, you will have to now come

over into Syria to me.’ I was sick, because I thought that if I got him over into Turkey, myself and Mandy could try to persuade him to let us take May home. It would have been a huge gamble, but it might have worked: he might have been so scared that he could be arrested that he might have agreed to save himself any further trouble, because I knew he was feeling some regret – not out of love for our daughter, but out of fear of what could possibly happen to him, having kidnapped a child. One stupid phone call from the international police force had jeopardised everything and possibly ruined any prospect of him agreeing to bring May back across the border to me.

I wanted to scream, but I had to stay calm. I had to continue playing the game. So I agreed to come across to him. I told him I would come over, and I would meet him between 7 and 8 p.m. Immediately his suspicions were aroused again, and he wanted to know why I had chosen this particular time frame. I said that I had to pack and I needed to lie down for a while, as my hips were causing me a lot of pain and I knew that I wouldn’t make it all the way if I didn’t rest up first. I told him I was very, very scared. After warning me not to do ‘anything funny’ or he would flee with May, he finally agreed to the plan. As I put the phone down, I looked at Mandy and I knew that she was thinking exactly as I was. Within hours we were to go our separate ways and the reality was, and she knew it only too well, that we might never see each other again.

I was walking into a war zone, to a husband who had beaten me to a pulp over many years while we lived in a civilised society. Now I was making my way into a country where women were subservient to their men, did what they were told, when they were told, and lived their lives dominated and beaten down in many cases. I was now going into *his* country. *His* life. I was going back to a man whom I had divorced less than 12 months before in fear of what he was capable of doing to me. Now I was walking back into his arms and into a life a million miles from my world.

But if I didn't go, what then? If I didn't try to save my daughter I feared that she would grow up to be one of those subservient women, with an arranged marriage, probably to a cousin, at fourteen years of age. She would have to be obedient and bow down to her husband's domination all of her life and she would always think that her mammy had abandoned her, left her to live that life alone, with no support.

I couldn't do that, and Mandy knew that only too well. I had to do what any other loving mother would do. I had to put my life on the line to save my daughter, and that's what I was going to do.

After I packed my few belongings, myself and Mandy went out for a bite to eat. We sat in a pizza place, oblivious to anything that was happening around us, ignorant of people's stares or whispers for the first time. It felt to me like Jesus must have felt at the Last Supper. We were both sick to the pit of our stomachs and we ate without saying a word. It was as if this was to be the last meal I would ever have with the sister I adored and loved. I felt as though I was being sentenced to death.

I was worried sick about how Mandy was going to make her way back on that same route we had taken together and then get back to Ireland, and yet all she was worried about was me. There had been no call from our Turkish 'friend' and now he wasn't even answering his phone. Reality was dawning that I was on my own. Yet, weirdly, we still hoped that it all might happen when I was in Syria, and if this was the case they would take both me and May, which would have been much easier on May as I would be there to explain what was happening and reassure her that we were both safe.

Mandy and I decided as we sat eating pizza that our code for the men coming would be based on something silly. We would use Sean as the subject matter, and if they were coming, Mandy would say, 'Sean is still off the drink,' insinuating he had given up his few pints of Guinness. And if there was no sign of the men, she would say, 'Sean is still having his few pints.' It sounds ridiculous to people who don't know us, but we had to say

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stupid things so Mostafa could never guess what we really meant. Mandy had all the code words written down. I couldn't take them with me, as it would have been too dangerous in case Mostafa found them, but I tried to memorise them as best I could.

Once we were both aware of what would be said and what it would mean, we made our way back to the hotel. In silence.

I wanted so much to be able to take a camera into Syria with me so that I could one day show everyone at home what the place was like, to give them an insight into the life little May would have had to live if I hadn't gone in to save her. Unfortunately, though, I knew that I would never get into the country, let alone into Mostafa's home, with a camera. Syrians didn't want any foreigner knowing what really went on behind their borders, and much as I wanted to attempt to take one in with me I knew that the consequences could be lethal. So I didn't risk it.

We asked the hotel porter to call the taxi that would take me to the border. They were very suspicious in this particular hotel as to why I needed to get to Syria, especially as I was clearly a single woman dressed in clothes that were totally contradictory to Muslim beliefs. I think they must have believed that I was going into Syria on a secret mission for a reason that I could not discuss, and so they ushered us out of the back door to avoid any attention from passers-by on the street outside.

When we reached the exit, the taxi was waiting for me and I just wanted to cry. I knew that Mandy had to stay here alone for the night, and I prayed that I wouldn't break down when I left her. I put my black handbag onto the back seat of my taxi as well as a fake Louis Vuitton luggage bag that Mandy had bought in Cyprus. I hadn't taken much with me, just some long dresses I had bought in Cyprus, some cardigans and a photo of Josh that we had planned to give to the Turkish guys along with May's toy if they were going in for her, to reassure her that these men were sent from her mammy.

I also made sure that I had plenty of medication with me.

My doctor had told me that all I could take before the hip replacement was rosehip, and so I had this in my bag, but we also put in a cocktail of over-the-counter drugs removed from their packaging, such as adult Motilium, infant Motilium, painkillers and anti-inflammatory tablets. Mostafa would not have known any of these drugs. We knew that May and myself would probably be sick from the food, but I had planned not to tell Mostafa which drugs were for which ailment. I would just let him think that they were all for my hip and for cancer, in case I did actually have the disease. But I knew that if I was eating food that I knew would upset my stomach I would at least have something to help me cope with it and he would never know. I was well equipped, or so I thought, for any illness that I could be hit with.

But nothing could have prepared me for leaving Mandy. I don't think I will ever be able to explain how I felt, watching my sister walk away. We were both crying, and the final hug we gave each other could have broken bones. My body felt weak, yet I felt no pain from the hip problem that had caused me so much agony in the weeks prior to this. If anything, I felt stronger than in a very long time. I was absolutely dreading seeing Mostafa Assad but longing to see and hold and squeeze my little girl. I had been living in anticipation of this for days, and now it was only hours away.

I dreaded what was going to happen if I succeeded in getting across the border, as I still wasn't sure if Mostafa knew anything about the publicity back home about his abduction of May. He was so devious that I feared telling Mandy that I thought he might actually know what had been going on all along and was actually playing a game with me as I played one with him. I had feared for days that Mostafa getting me into Syria could be a ploy to beat me up and teach me a lesson, or that he would trick me into thinking that I was going to see May and play happy families when in fact he might have left her with a family member and would never let me see her until he felt I was being an obedient wife. He knew that my life revolved around

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my child and that absolutely nothing could hurt me more than losing May. I didn't want to tell Mandy that I feared Mostafa was only letting me see May because he thought I might have cancer and because he knew that my visa would only last for a short period. He knew I would have to leave Syria at some stage, and if I was diagnosed with cancer on my return and I died, my family would have a harder battle to get May back to Ireland because he would already have her in Syria. My mind had been racing over the previous days, but there was only so much I could burden Mandy with.

As I started to make my way to the taxi, Mandy ran back and grabbed me. Swinging me around, she said, 'Louise, if I let you go people are going to think that I let you go and that it was my fault.' But I reassured her, and I told her to tell our family and friends that she had no choice but to let me go. I reminded her that she would do the same if it was Josh, and she nodded. We were both heartbroken. But I had a job to do. I had to go into this country and get my child back and nothing and no one could stop me now.

As I drove off, I looked behind and I remember seeing Mandy sobbing. I remember how she put her hands to her face and then ran them through her hair, as if she was desperate. It is funny how certain things stick in your mind, but this was a vision I was to hold on to for a long time. A vision that made me realise how much my sister loved me and I her.

As we drove along in the taxi, the driver got a phone call on his mobile. He spoke in Arabic to this person and then he turned to me and handed me the phone. A man I did not know told me in English that because of the dangers associated with me going into Syria the driver would not be able to take me all the way to the border but that he would drop me off as close as possible. He feared for the safety of the driver if we were stopped at the border. I understood his concern, because I had been on the Internet with Mandy for days as we looked at the possibilities of escape routes and so on, and I had seen that the Syrian government had issued a blacklist of all known protesters

and therefore border checks were a huge risk for anyone who was not a known supporter of President al-Assad. I had no idea who this driver was or what his background was, and it was highly possible that he might have been in trouble before with the authorities in Syria or Turkey and his name was on that list, or it could simply have been that he was afraid of being stopped and checked simply because those at border patrol needed no excuse to beat, arrest or even kill someone. They could do whatever they wanted to whomever they wanted, and having a European woman in his car was a problem in itself.

I agreed that this man could not put his life in danger, and we continued to drive along the dirt roads. I noticed how there was virtually no vegetation and no houses, except for some makeshift shacks along the way scattered here and there. It was a vast, very open area with no shops or businesses, just sand and dirt tracks. As we drove, the dust was spraying up behind the car and we were showered with debris from oncoming vehicles. The cars were old and battered, as was my taxi, and you could tell that the cars were considered clean by the standards they held in this area, but they would have been unacceptable in any Western country. But the taxi was a means of transport, and as far as I was concerned it was a godsend to have a driver who had been recommended by the hotel and who I hoped I could trust.

We exchanged a few words as we drove, but I noticed him glancing at me every now and then through his rear-view mirror and I knew he was wondering what the hell I was doing going into a country savaged by war and uprisings when even those living just a few miles across the border wouldn't dream of it.

As I sat there thinking of all different scenarios that could happen once I met Mostafa, I looked out the window to see a refugee camp filled with Syrians that I had seen a number of times on the news. It was a makeshift camp with about five or six hundred white tents. I had heard on the news that these were Syrians who had attempted to get through to Turkey through no-man's-land but were caught and had been refused

entry. It was heartbreaking to look at those people. It looked like there could have been a few thousand people there, all fleeing in fear of their lives, all desperate for a new life under a 'normal' regime. There were little children, hundreds of them, it seemed, running around in their bare feet on the sandy, dirty gravel and men sitting around fires, like makeshift barbecues, eating meat. This was the first image I had of what life must have been like for those living in Syria at that time, when there was a war on. If people were prepared to go to these extremes to escape, knowing that this could be the extent of their lives if they were lucky to get out at all, then things were even worse than I could ever have imagined.

The camp was to my left, and, as we made our way up a mountainous road, to my right I saw two men struggling to get under a barbed-wire fence. I first saw a bag being thrown over the fence, then the men jumping down and trying to lift it, pulling and tugging at the fencing. As they saw our car approaching they threw themselves to the ground, trying to hide. I knew immediately that they were Syrian and trying to get into Turkey.

We only travelled another five or ten minutes, and up ahead I could see the checkpoints and the lorries and cars queuing up to get through. The driver pulled in and told me that this was the end of the road for him, he couldn't take me any further, and he held his hand out for payment. I could see that he couldn't wait to get out of this place and so I handed him the agreed payment of 100 euros for bringing me on a journey that took roughly half an hour. I knew that I was being ripped off, but I had no choice but to pay whatever these people were asking, as they put their own lives at risk getting myself and Mandy to and from certain areas. I knew that 100 euros would change that man's life so much and probably keep himself and his family in food for a month. It was a small price to pay for getting me that step closer to my daughter.

As I took my bag and left the car, I was terrified but filled with the anticipation of seeing May. I wasn't kidding myself, I

was walking into a waking nightmare, I knew that only too well, but it was a nightmare that I couldn't avoid.

As I proceeded to walk towards the checkpoint, three men who were sitting on the side of the road jumped up and ran across to me. I knew that they were Syrian. They asked me in Arabic for money, pushing their hands into my face and tugging at my cardigan. I knew what they wanted, but I just ignored them and pulled away and started to walk faster towards the border. Thankfully, one of the guards, who I now call one of the many angels I met along my journey, saw what was happening, and as I ran towards a buzzer that was on a gate he came running out. As the gate started to open slowly, he grabbed hold of me and dragged me in. With that he must have hit another button, because the gate closed behind me almost instantly.

I just calmly opened my bag, I don't know how I managed to be so focused, and I took out my passport and handed it to him. In English, he asked me where I was going to. I said I was going into Syria. He replied, 'No, you're not. Do you have any idea what is happening in Syria?' I told him I knew what it was like. I knew they were killing people but that I had to go. He replied, 'I can't let you go in, I'm sorry.'

I took out my purse and I said, 'I have money and I will give it to you if you let me go through.' I was very upset. He still refused to budge, and obviously the issue wasn't money but my safety. I then told him that my ex-husband had taken my baby and that I needed to get in to save her. With that, he took me past a line of Syrians trying to get back into Syria. And he took my passport and we went to an outbuilding where there were three men inside checking documents. As they were all staring at me and my Irish passport, one man made a phone call. When he put the phone down, he handed the passport back to my angel and it was stamped. My angel said that he had no choice but to let me in, as it was a legal requirement to do so. I kissed his hand and said, 'I can't thank you enough.' I said goodbye to him, and he asked me where I was going to next and how I was

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getting there. I told him that I was going to walk to the main border, and he seemed totally shocked.

He said, 'It is a five-kilometre walk from here to the border of Syria. It is the most dangerous walk. It is filled with bandits who live in this area because they cannot get into Turkey.' At this stage it was about 7.15 p.m. It was dark already and I was very conscious of the time, as I had told Mostafa that I would be there between 7 and 8 p.m. The man said, 'You cannot go like this, you won't make it.' With that, he walked away from me and over to a car parked nearby. I heard him speak in Arabic to the driver, and then he walked back to me and said that this man was going to take me as far as the Syrian border. He said, 'Do not give him money or gold. This guy owes me a favour.' I heard him tell the driver, in Arabic, that if he asked me for any money he would never work in that area again, and that he had given me his phone number and if anything went wrong I was going to ring him. I will never be able to say how grateful I was to this man, because he truly saved my life that night and he had no reason whatsoever to help me. The driver simply nodded and I got into the car.

The previous day, President al-Assad had declared a ban on motorbikes in towns and cities, as the owners were using them in protests to escape quickly. I had read this on the Internet the night before, and my first image as we drove along the five kilometres to the border was seeing motorbikes abandoned all over the road. At some points there were groups of men trying to repair some of these damaged bikes on the ground. There must have been roughly about five or six hundred of them lying abandoned as we made our way along the dirt roads, dodging motorbikes or spare parts everywhere.

People kept coming up to the car knocking on the windows as we drove along slowly, but we kept driving, totally ignoring their pleas. There were some makeshift tents lining the streets as well, and I saw one man on the side of the road being treated for wounds as the blood ran down his leg. I couldn't make out what had happened to him, but I guessed he might have been

a protester beaten up somewhere else but who had made his way back to this area because it was near the border and possibly a safer area to be in than where he had come from.

As we drove up this road, we suddenly came to an area where there were a number of Syrian police officers. I was absolutely shocked to see a huge building, which turned out to be a duty-free centre. It was something like you would see in an international airport, and it looked so out of place. It had big glass windows and revolving doors. I could see there were men dressed in uniforms working away and on the shelves I could see every cigarette brand imaginable and a full range of alcohol: wine, whisky, vodka, everything. It was all clearly visible from outside: shelves upon shelves of what I thought would have been banned substances in a strictly Muslim country. Alcohol is generally not tolerated in Syria, so this was quite a shocking scene for me. Yet I could see people walking around, buying things.

As I was watching all this in fascination, the driver left the car, and then all of a sudden I was startled to hear a knock on the window. As I looked up, I saw Mostafa at the door. He opened it and said, 'Louise, are you OK?'

My hair stood up on end and my blood ran cold. I exclaimed, 'No, I am not, Mostafa. I have been through a horrendous experience, even getting here, my hips are killing me and I am shattered.'

He said, 'Don't worry, I will look after you from now.' With that, he got into the taxi and he directed the driver to continue driving to the border-control area. Seemingly we still hadn't crossed the border into Syria; these were all just points along the way before being granted entry or exit.

When we got to the border-control building, Mostafa took my passport and we both got out of the car to get my visa checked. Mostafa had arranged the visa application but my passport still had to be stamped. He spoke to those in the office, and when we came out with the visa in hand he started complaining over the fact that it had cost him 50 dollars to get it.

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We got back into the taxi and he told the driver to take us on up the road to the actual border itself, which he did. He drove us across this very small border, with a chain-link fence. There were two men there, but they didn't check anything. Mostafa had a car parked just over the border and we left the taxi. I thanked the man who had taken me over, as agreed, for free.

When I got into Mostafa's car – his father's car, a maroon-coloured Kia – I asked him how May was. He said she was fine: just that, nothing else. Then from the back seat he plucked a black hijab with delicate beading around the edges and a long black dress with similar beading, and threw them at me and said, 'Put this on. This is what you will be wearing now.'

He made me put it on as we sat in the car. I just pulled it on over the clothes I was already wearing. He helped me fix the hijab in place, rushing in case someone saw me with no veil covering my head. I was still wearing a pair of flip-flops I had bought in Cyprus, which clearly was not acceptable for Muslim women, but he told me that he would sort that and buy me shoes the following day. I told him that I would need to ring my sister to tell her that I was all right and that I was safe.

I knew that he was wondering how I'd managed to get to Syria from Hatay alone and so I told him that I was very upset because I'd had to leave my sister behind in the town and it was very emotional for us both. I said Mandy was very upset. He said, 'Ring her, ring her. Tell her I will bring her over here and she can stay in a hotel.' I knew there was no way that she would come, but I played along. I rang her and I told her I was fine and that I was with Mostafa now. He knew that I had a phone with me and he didn't try to take it from me, which was a huge relief. I told Mandy that everything was fine and, playing along as planned, I said to her that she was to continue selling everything I had and then send all the money over to us.

She said, 'Of course I will. And tell Mostafa I am fully behind you both in this. He has to mind you now. Tell Mostafa I will organise everything for you now and send him the money and

ask him how I am best sending it. Keep your phone on and I will update you both.’ She was, of course, saying all of this knowing that he could hear everything she was saying as he was beside me in the front seat, driving.

I told her that we would sort all that out and get back to her. I remember asking Mostafa if he wanted to talk to Mandy, but, of course, he was too embarrassed to say a word, and he indicated with his hands and by shaking his head that he didn’t want to speak to her.

He believed that Mandy was going to sell everything for me: the cars, the furniture from the apartment and bits and pieces. Mostafa knew that I had savings in the bank from a previous house I had sold in Cyprus before moving from Paphos to Limassol, and in his head Mandy was going to close my bank account as well and transfer everything over to Syria. I told him that I had given Mandy power of attorney through a solicitor to enable her sell everything and transfer the funds, and he believed it all. He knew that he had to keep her and me onside to make his plan work. So he had to be nice to me or the plan would be useless.

As we drove to Mostafa’s house, which took half an hour or so, through filthy streets with no footpath markings, no lines in the middle of the road to show you where you were driving and no way of knowing if you were on a road or a pathway, he kept checking my hijab. At a few stages along the way he stopped to rearrange my clothing, as I wasn’t used to wearing it, and at one of these stops an open-topped truck pulled up alongside us and asked why we had stopped and whether we needed help. I had seen scenes like these on the news when they were covering the war in Syria, and my stomach tensed up almost immediately. I knew that shootings happened in scenes just like this, because I had witnessed it clearly on TV, but thankfully Mostafa gave some excuse, saying everything was fine, and they drove on. The relief was immense.

We carried on driving, and we eventually arrived in Mostafa’s home city, Idlib. Immediately I was hit with the strong smell of

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sewage. There was filth and dirt and people's household rubbish and clothing strewn everywhere. It was obvious that they did not have rubbish collection in this area, because it was the filthiest place I had ever seen in my life.

There were men driving along in the dark on donkeys, whipping the poor animals as they struggled along these dirt roads. The cars the people were driving were falling apart as they made their way along the streets and would never have passed any sort of roadworthiness test in any other country. It was a deplorable scene, worse than any of the areas I had been through on my route here. I told Mostafa that I had seen what Idlib was like on the news and that I was worried, to which he replied that it was all simply hype by the media. He had only been back in this country a week and he had been brainwashed already, and now trying to brainwash me. The West, as usual, was being blamed for painting a bad picture of his homeland, a land he had hated with a vengeance until he decided to kidnap our child just days before. I sat and listened to his ranting as reality hit me from every angle, even though it was pitch black outside. Dark or not, I couldn't be fooled by what was clearly in front of me.

All of a sudden he pulled in along the roadside, opposite what looked like a fruit and vegetable shop. He told me to wait in the car and not to get out, that he needed to buy something and he would be back in minutes. As he left, I closed the window: he had left it open because it was such a balmy night, but closing the window helped to cover up the foul smell, which, though he was obviously used to it, was unbearable to me. I pulled the scarf over my face to try to block the stench even further, but it was of little help. As I watched him walk across the road, the level of hatred I felt for this man was mighty. I was grateful that he hadn't tried to give me a hug or a kiss when we met, as my real feelings would have been very apparent to him. All I wanted at this stage was to get to May.

I was being as strong as possible, given the circumstances, and I knew I had to keep up the pretence. Within minutes of

him leaving the car I heard this deafening noise. It was indescribable. I looked in the rear-view mirror and I saw what looked like a thousand protesters, mostly men, waving flags and carrying an open coffin, a makeshift coffin made from a wooden box. They were all chanting and screaming carrying this body, and to my horror I noticed that they were coming towards the car. I immediately stretched across and locked the doors, fearing they would drag me out and beat me to death. I was a European in a car alone with no one to protect me, and I thought that was it, I was dead. I could see women in the side streets grabbing their children and running and I didn't know what to do. Should I run? Should I hide on the floor? I was desperate.

I totally froze. Suddenly I saw Mostafa, and he looked like he was about to run across the road to me, but then he realised that if he did, they would probably trample him. (I only realised later that if you run into a protest it is seen as disrespectful and you would be beaten to death there and then, so that explained why Mostafa had stepped back into the doorway out of their way.)

As they all marched past the car, it started to rock violently. I thought for a brief moment that they would turn the car over, with me in it, but within a few minutes, as I sat there praying that it would be over fast, they just disappeared around the corner and into another street. As they passed they were chanting in Arabic, 'Death to the president, death to the president.' Mostafa walked across and got into the car, and I turned to him and said, 'No trouble, eh?' He had told me on the phone that everything was fine where he was living. A total lie. He didn't reply to my comment and we continued to drive through the city.

As we approached a checkpoint, he said that it was manned by the army and that it would be fine. We weren't stopped, and we carried on until we passed something that resembled a big motorway. There were rocks and stones strewn everywhere and a dead donkey on the side of the road with the president's name written in paint on its rear. I asked Mostafa what that

was all about and he said that anti-government protesters were writing President al-Assad's name on the bottoms and backs of dogs and donkeys and then using these poor animals for target practice.

There were pictures of President al-Assad absolutely everywhere. He was smiling down in various poses from nearly every street, and in some streets there were multiple posters. It was as if he didn't want anyone forgetting who was in charge. You couldn't go from one street to the next without seeing him stare down at you. It was the oddest scene. I had never seen anything like it, even during election time back home, when every politician likes to place himself in our eyeline, everywhere. But this was very different. It was definitely a form of propaganda.

As we went across this main road we came to another checkpoint, manned this time by men who were not in uniform, as they had been at the previous checkpoint, but were instead wearing jeans and shirts and tracksuits. Some were wearing bandanas on their heads. Mostafa told me that these were men guarding his own village and that this checkpoint was OK. I was wearing the hijab, so when they looked into the car I kept my eyes focused down onto the floor so as not to arouse suspicion, and they just waved us on.

We drove along and arrived at Mostafa's village. One of my first images was seeing green lights on the top of three buildings, and I realised immediately that these were all mosques. Most little towns and villages have one mosque, so to see three made me feel very intimidated. It meant that this was a very religious Muslim area and that it would most definitely be practised by everyone. There was a big possibility it could house some very extreme fundamentalists. The village had big walls, covered in graffiti. It resembled a compound.

I only learned afterwards that this particular village was a very dangerous area to live in or even be in. Tensions were running high between locals and the Syrian army, which shot people on the streets most days for protesting. You had to be

very careful once you left your home because snipers were everywhere: on roofs, on derelict buildings, everywhere. You took your life in your hands every day. But even if I had known exactly how bad it was going to be, I still would have had no option but to come.

I looked around, and even in the darkness I could see the stark reality of what was around me. The so-called 'houses' had corrugated-iron or tin roofs, and most houses had no doors or glass in the windows, they were just covered in sheets. I remember thinking how it was odd that at nearly 9 p.m. there were children running around the streets, young children, maybe some as young as two or three years old, with no shoes on, and at one stage Mostafa had to swerve to avoid these children because they simply wouldn't move, even seeing an oncoming car heading for them.

I remember trying to make out all the landmarks along the way so I could tell Mandy as much as possible to relay to the Turkish smugglers. I wanted them to get a feel of the area so they could try to pinpoint exactly where we were.

When we pulled up at Mostafa's house I was slightly relieved, as it looked somewhat habitable. He had been sending money home during the good years in Cyprus when he was making money from working in construction. He ushered me straight into the house, and it was obvious that he didn't want anyone to see me. Next door was a two-storey house that towered over his little house, and he clearly didn't want whoever lived in this particular house to see what was happening.

I knew that this street was full of his family, as he had told me years before how one couple built a house there years ago and then all of their family moved in around them as they grew up. So the whole road was filled with the Assad family.

As soon as I got into the house, Mostafa told me to sit there and wait until he came back with May. I remember being elated that I was about to be reunited with my little girl.

I looked around and realised that I was in the standard living room. Most Arabic houses have two sitting rooms: one for the

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women and the other for male gatherings only. The furniture was a red colour with gold going through it. There were three chairs in this room and gold-framed pictures on the walls depicting sections from the Koran. I then walked into the room where the men clearly congregated for their religious gatherings. It was covered wall to wall with cushions, some on the floor, others that were propped straight up.

This was a typical Arabic home, but it was alien to me, as I had never lived like this before. I had been married to a Muslim, but he was not, I thought, a fanatic. He never demanded his own room to meet with his friends with no women allowed. He had an aggressive nature, and he could be possessive, perhaps because in his culture men enjoyed more rights than women, but I never witnessed a strict Islamic side to his nature. But it was becoming clearer to me that he had been living a lie for years in Cyprus, leading me to believe that his religion didn't really matter to him. I believe now that all that time he was planning to snatch May and take her back to Syria so she could become a devout Muslim. The man I had met all those years ago in a bar was very different to the monster I now knew.

I was so excited, though, as I waited for my little girl to burst through the doors to see her mammy again. I was so anxious about meeting her, praying that she hadn't been hurt by her father or anyone else, praying that he had cared for and protected her all this time.

But as the door opened and she walked through, it took me a minute to recognise her. My little baby was dressed so differently. I was absolutely shocked and horrified. She looked so different. Someone had tightly plaited her lovely long brown hair, and she was wearing a horrible cheap pair of black trousers and red Arabic clogs with a gold pattern running through them. Her top was black and white with horrible cheap lace around the neck and the ends of her sleeves. It was typical Arab village clothing. When she came clomping through the door onto the tiled floor in those horrible clogs she ran over to me, and I

remember thinking that although her father had only had her for a week, he had already managed to change her into his way of life.

She clearly didn't know what to say to me as he stood staring at us both. She nervously looked at him before saying, 'Mama. Look. I told you I would mind my Nintendo for you. I kept it safe.' I felt like bursting into tears. She treasured her Nintendo DS and it was obviously a lifesaver to her in this hellhole. She sat on my lap and he left the room. As soon as he was gone, we started to kiss and hug and she was squeezing my leg. Once she knew that he was definitely gone, she looked around and she whispered in a really low voice, 'Mama, I'm really worried.'

I said, 'What are you worried about, love?'

And my heart melted when she replied, 'I was meant to start school.'

I said, 'Don't worry, love. I rang the school and I told them that you were on holiday and they were fine about it.'

Then she said, 'And what about Maria?' Maria was our cat and May idolised her. I reassured her that my friend Janine was feeding Maria and looking after her. I could see her relax once she knew that school and poor Maria were all fine. And I remember thinking how clever she was, because as Mostafa walked back into the room she went back to being obedient to her father. I knew there and then that she was also playing the game. She had seen me so many times trying to push the right buttons to keep him calm and on my side, and I was watching a complete carbon copy of myself as I watched my little girl trying to gain her father's approval and love.

As he came closer, she acted as if she had said nothing to me that would have caused him concern. She immediately said, 'Oh, Baba, did you see my new shoes?' She always called him Baba, the Arabic word for father, and now more than ever it was important that she used that word. This sort of behaviour would keep him happy. Hearing May speak his language would appease him no end.

It was getting late, and I told him that I was in a lot of pain

and very tired from the long day. I asked him if he would mind if I slept with May that night, as I had missed her so much. He agreed. He knew that I was sick, and he didn't seem to mind. There were two bedrooms in the house, one with a big wardrobe and a king-size bed and a children's room with three mattresses on the floor and three throws and three pillows. This was the room where May was sleeping with the brother and sister whom she had only briefly met when she was a baby, two children I had only once met for a very short time and had hardly heard of.

That night I met Shazza, the girl, who was ten, and Adele, the boy, who was now eight years old. I was introduced to them very quickly. Neither of them would have remembered that we had met before, when they were both only babies, Shazza four and Adele just two years old. No sooner had we been introduced than they were ushered to another room, leaving myself and May alone.

It was a very unusual feeling, being in this house where my ex-husband lived with two children from a previous marriage, and it must have seemed just as uncomfortable for those children, because now they had a woman in the house who they didn't know: a woman who was very different to any female they had met before in their short lives, and a Westerner who lived a very different life to them. But I had to wait to make my judgement of them, and them of me. I just wanted time with my baby.

I cuddled up with May that night and she was chatting away excitedly, relaxed in knowing that we were back together again. She said that her aunts, 'Baba's sisters', were asking her where she got the marks on her body. Fearing what she was about to tell me, I said, 'What marks, sweetheart?'

She said, 'The marks I got when Baba slapped me to get me onto the plane.'

A knot formed in my stomach, and I hugged her so tightly I thought I would squash her. He had beaten his own child to kidnap her. I wanted to run out and stab him. I was livid. I told

her he would never lay a finger on her again and that I would make sure she was never put in danger again, and, gently, I probed her about what had happened that day. We were careful to whisper in case he was listening at the door. Poor little May was well aware of what he was capable of and, as she told me, she constantly checked the door to make sure he heard nothing.

She told me how he had told her that morning that he was taking her to a big new shopping centre and he was going to buy her a new Barbie. She believed him. She thought that this big building was a mall, when, in fact, it was an airport. He bought her a Barbie in the duty-free shop, but when she went outside she suddenly saw the plane and realised what was happening. She said she started to cry and told him that she didn't want to go on a plane. She said that she had told him that her mammy said she was never to get on a plane without her mammy, but he told her that her mammy knew and she was fine because he was taking her on holidays. She said she still wasn't happy and was crying because she wanted to go home to me, but he beat her repeatedly to get her onto the flight as she sobbed and sobbed.

I didn't know what to say except to tell her over and over again how much I loved her and that nothing like that would ever happen to her again.

Looking back on it now, I realise that the only reason he allowed me to talk to May on the phone that first day was to reassure her, because taking her would be a lot easier for him if May thought that I was OK with it. He was even cleverer than I had given him credit for.

That night, we cuddled up and little May fell asleep in my arms. I kept stroking her hair and kissing her forehead. I remember as I lay there trying to sleep in this strange bed how I was terrified to hear gunshots outside the window. I didn't know whether they came from right outside or a short distance away, but I was petrified. I could also hear bangs in the distance from either bombs exploding or tank fire. It was a different world. A different, frightening life.

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Somehow, I managed to doze off, and was awoken by the first call to prayer from the local mosque. It was so daunting to hear the chants, and I just wrapped my arms around May and held her as tightly as I could without waking her.

After a short while, I looked around the room and listened out for noise and soon realised that Mostafa wasn't in the house. I immediately went to the front door to look outside and see where I was and what was around me. But as I turned the handle of the door, I found it was locked.

I knew there and then that this was the start of my life now. I was now also a prisoner in this man's house. In this man's country. My lovely life, our life, as I knew it, was over. Indefinitely.